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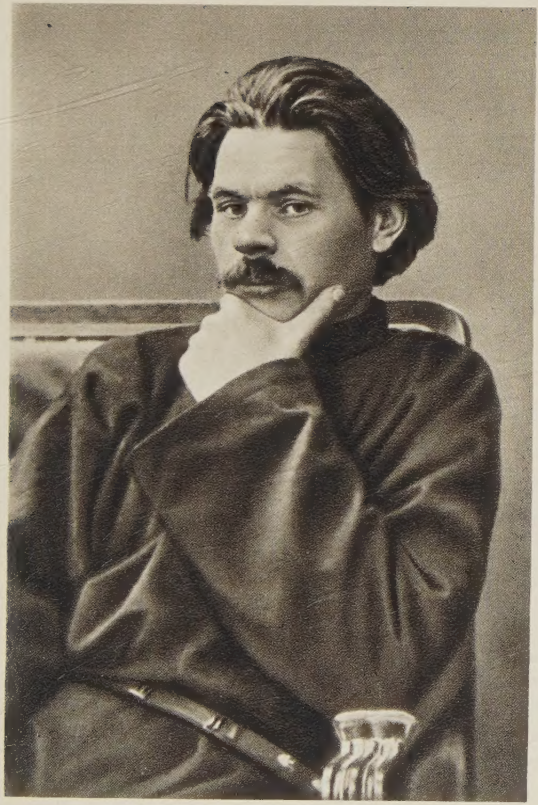

A. M. Gorky

Moscow 1903

М. ГОРЬКИЙ

ИЗБРАННЫЕ РАССКАЗЫ

1892 - 1901

ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ
НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ
Москва

M. GORKY

SELECTED SHORT STORIES

1892 - 1901

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DESIGNED BY E. KOGAN

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CONTENTS

	Page
PREFACE	9
MAKAR CHUDRA	17
AT THE SALT MARSH	45
OLD IZERGIL	69
CHELKASH	116
ABOUT A LITTLE BOY AND A LITTLE GIRL WHO DID NOT FREEZE TO DEATH	184
SONG OF THE FALCON	201
EXPOSURE	212
A MITE OF A GIRL	217
KOLUSHA	228
THE WOMAN WITH THE BLUE EYES	235
HOW SEMAGA WAS CAUGHT	260
A READER	274

Page

THE POET 305

KONOVALOV 321

VANKA MAZIN 422

MISCHIEF-MAKER 450

THE ORLOVS 485

FOR WANT OF SOMETHING BETTER TO DO . . 602

SONG OF THE STORMY PETREL 638

PREFACE

Gorky's writings represent an impressive chronicle of modern Russian history. His was a life of hardship and labour, and of constant searching for social justice which brought him to throw in his lot with those fighting in the cause of the people. His personal history reflects the intellectual growth of the Russian working class as a whole, a class which became the vanguard of the world revolutionary movement.

While still a child, Gorky began to work for his living. In 1884, a sixteen-year-old apprentice avid for learning, he set out for the town of Kazan in the hope of being able to enter the university there. But life had prepared other "universities" for him; in Kazan he was to make a study of the life of vagrants, of slum-dwellers, of the workmen in the dingy basement of Semyonov's bakery. And in addition he was to attend a "political university" consisting of a revolutionary circle held by a group of intellectuals. In this circle he became acquainted with the basic tenets of Marxism, read books on philosophy and political economy. The Kazan period supplied him with abundant material for his future writings.

In 1891 Gorky set out to roam his native land. He tramped through the Ukraine, Bessarabia, the Crimea, and down the Caucasian sea-coast, doing any odd job to earn a meal. He ended up in Tiflis, where he got a job in a railway repair shop. There he joined a workers' revolutionary circle and came into close contact with Marxists. This determined the course his intellectual searchings were to take from then on. There, too, he made the acquaintance of A. M. Kaluzhny, a champion of the people's cause, who urged him to put in writing all he had seen and experienced. His first short story, "Makar Chudra," was published in the Tiflis newspaper *Kavkaz* in September 1892. It was signed by the pseudonym "Maxim Gorky," under which the author wrote ever after; his real name was Alexei Peshkov.

This, then, was the beginning of Gorky's literary career. On returning to Nizhni-Novgorod he enjoyed the patronage of the progressive Russian writer Korolenko, who read his stories with a sternly critical eye and offered him invaluable advice. With the aid of Korolenko another story, "Chelkash," was published in one of the popular magazines.

At this time Gorky began to contribute short stories, feature articles and biting satirical feuilletons to the big Volga newspapers *Nizhegorodsky Listok* and *Samarskaya Gazeta*.

The year 1898 was made momentous for Gorky by the publication of the first collection of his short stories and articles. He was becoming famous.

In his early stories Gorky gives a broad and many-sided picture of Russian life in the 90's. But he does not limit himself to the mere telling of a story; he ponders deeply the significance of human existence and the laws of human development. Gorky tries not only to comprehend and generalize the facts of life, but also to give full expression to ideas of freedom and bring them to "the poor and downtrodden." He seeks and finds the form best suited to his purpose: the short story written in revolutionary-romantic style.

Gorky's cycle of romantic stories sprang from the same source as his realistic ones. But if in the latter he was unable to completely express his ideals, in his romantic stories and legends he had free sweep for telling of his dreams for the future. In contrast with the reactionary romanticism of the symbolists who escaped from actuality into a world of illusion, Gorky's romanticism is inspired by dreams which look beyond today's actuality into the actuality of tomorrow.

Gorky's early heroic romanticism, charged as it is with firm faith in future victory, reflects the upsurge of the revolutionary movement in the 90's. "We sing a song to the madness of daring" is the leitmotiv of all Gorky's romantic stories ("Makar Chudra," "Old Izergil," "Death and the Maiden," "Song of the Falcon," "Song of the Stormy Petrel," and others). These words from "Song of the Falcon" rang out like a revolutionary cry, a "proud challenge to struggle for freedom and light."

The image of the Falcon symbolizes the revolutionary who bases his struggle to improve the people's lot on demands of the highest justice.

In taking up a stand for freedom and in defending the cause of the oppressed, Gorky followed the humanistic traditions of Russian classical literature. He called himself a pupil of his older contemporaries—Tolstoy, Chekhov and Korolenko, and he always urged writers to learn from the classics. The Russian revolutionary democrats and literary critics Belinsky, Chernyshevsky and Dobrolyubov exercised strong influence on the development of his aesthetic principles. Like these men, he looked upon literature as a weapon in the struggle to change the world.

Many of Gorky's contemporaries testify to the enthusiastic reception accorded his stories of the 90's. "'The Heart of Danko' filled us with delight. It pulsed in unison with our own hearts," wrote P. A. Zalomov, a revolutionary worker who served as the prototype for Pavel Vlasov in Gorky's novel "Mother." "Each of us felt that his own heart was aflame with zeal for the socialist revolution, and we found our only happiness, our only significance, in the struggle to achieve this revolution. 'Song of the Falcon' was of more importance to us than dozens of proclamations."

Long years of wandering afforded Gorky an opportunity to make a thorough study of Russian provincial life. In the stories and articles written in the 90's he exposes the stagnancy of provincial

life, the narrow-mindedness, spiritual poverty, cruelty and indifference of the middle classes. The story "For Want of Something Better to Do" is particularly incriminatory.

Gorky was unrelenting with professional people of the type of schoolmaster Korzhik ("Leisure Hours of Schoolmaster Korzhik"), whose weakness of character made them incapable of contributing to the improvement of life and even led them to neglect their duties as members of society. At the same time that Gorky denounced those who isolated themselves from the masses by living within the narrow circle of selfish middle-class interests, he gave us a picture of progressive-minded intellectuals and of their growing discontent. One of the best stories devoted to this theme is "A Mite of a Girl," depicting a young girl of the intellectual class who sacrificed everything, even her life, to serve the revolutionary cause. In this story we see how progressive-minded intellectuals identified their fate with that of the common people. The "mite of a girl" served as a sketch for the revolutionary intellectuals Gorky gave us in his later works. The theme of the intelligentsia as treated in Gorky's early realistic stories is always linked with the theme of the common people, for Gorky saw in the intelligentsia a force capable of spreading revolutionary consciousness among the masses, who, at the time he wrote, were already rising for the struggle.

The theme of people from "the lower depths," the outcasts of bourgeois society, held a prominent

place in Gorky's early writings. There were, for instance, such stories as "Chelkash," "Konovalov" and "The Orlovs." He was not inclined to look upon these people as positive characters. In presenting them he pointed out their anarchistic tendencies and their contempt for a life of labour. He showed that their hatred of the bourgeois way of life became a hatred of all forms of social organization, and their contempt for property became a contempt for labour. At the same time he revealed the positive traits of character that they possessed in common with the people as a whole. A love of freedom and of nature, an inquisitiveness leading them to search for the meaning of life—these are qualities possessed by most of Gorky's vagrants. The psychology of a man like Konovalov is typical. In spite of being a talented, skilful workman and a man of noble impulses, he comes to grief because he finds no support in his environment and does not see where to apply his energies. Without being linked to any conscious, purposeful activity, his noble impulses are short-lived and come to naught.

While employed in the railway repair shop in Tiflis, Gorky became convinced that the future belonged to the working class. It was only among the working class that he found real heroes for his stories. In his story "At the Salt Marsh" he shows us how the minds of these workmen became distorted by the insufferable labour. Hard, resentful, they gave vent to their feelings by playing a cruel practical joke on a youth who was a worker like themselves.

In the story "Mischief-Maker" we are shown a workman (a type-setter) with a clearer understanding of who his enemies are. But his protest is voiced in a meaningless bit of mischief—he changes the wording of the leading article in the day's newspaper.

Soon after this Gorky was to create types who presented a truly revolutionary programme of action. Among them are Nil, the railway engineer from the play "The Philistines," and Pavel Vlasov, the revolutionary factory worker from the novel "Mother."

In the 90's Gorky tried to clarify the task facing writers in this period of awakening labour consciousness. This entailed arguing with writers of the naturalistic school, with futurists, impressionists, and others. The result was a controversy of vast importance between an artist of a new type and those who championed old, outmoded principles. Gorky denounced and ridiculed writers who glossed over social problems in their works and who looked upon the common people as a passive inert mass capable of inspiring only a feeling of compassion.

Whenever he touched on the theme of art, Gorky, like the revolutionary democrats who preceded him, harshly criticized all theories of "pure art." In stories like "The Poet" he depicted writers of his day who had broken with the tradition of serving the people.

"The purpose of literature," writes Gorky in his fantasy "A Reader," "is to help man to know him-

self, to fortify his belief in himself and support his striving after the truth; to discover the good in people and to root out what is ignoble; to kindle shame, wrath, courage in their hearts; to help them acquire a strength dedicated to lofty purposes and sanctify their lives with the holy spirit of beauty."

In his early stories Gorky posed many of the problems that were to trouble him all his life, and we can trace the origin of many of the characters of his later works to their less developed types in these early stories. Even in the work of the 90's we can detect the beginnings of that new method which Gorky was to introduce into literature—the method of socialist realism, combining a truthful portrayal of life as it is with a clear perception of what it ought to become.

Gorky paved the way for that new and free type of literature to which, as Lenin said: ". . . more and more writers will be drawn because of their sympathy with the working people and the ideas of socialism, and not because of considerations of gain or personal ambition. It will be a literature of freedom, for instead of serving a few spoiled ladies or the fat and bored 'upper ten thousand,' it will be written for the millions of working people who represent a country's pride, its strength and its future."

MAKAR CHUDRA

A COLD damp wind came out of the sea, wafting over the steppe the pensive melody of the waves breaking on the shore and the rustle of dry bushes. Now and then a gust would lift up some shrivelled yellow leaves and throw them into our camp-fire, causing the flames to flare up; then the darkness of the autumn night would shudder and start back in fright, giving us a glimpse of the boundless steppe to the left, the limitless sea to the right, and in front of me—the form of Makar Chudra, an old Gipsy who was keeping watch over the horses belonging to his camp pitched some fifty paces away.

Heedless of the cold wind that blew open his Caucasian coat and struck mercilessly

at his bare hairy chest, he lay facing me in a graceful and vigorous pose, drawing regularly at his enormous pipe, emitting thick clouds of smoke through his nose and mouth, gazing fixedly over my head into the silent darkness of the steppe, talking incessantly and making not the slightest effort to protect himself from the vicious attacks of the wind.

"So you go tramping about the world, do you? Good for you. You have made the right choice, young falcon. That is the only way. Go about the world seeing things, and when you have looked your fill, lie down and die."

"Life? Your fellow-men?" he queried on hearing my objections to his "That is the only way." "Why should you worry about that? Are not you life itself? And as for your fellow-men, they always have and always will get on famously without you. Do you really think anybody needs you? You are neither bread nor a stick, and so nobody wants you.

"Learn and teach others, you say. Can you learn how to make people happy? No,

you cannot. Wait until your hair is grey before you try to teach others. What will you teach them? Every man knows what he needs. The wise ones take what life has to offer, the stupid ones get nothing, but each man learns for himself.

"A curious lot, people: they all herd together, trampling on each other, when there is this much space—" and he made a sweeping gesture out towards the steppe. "And all of them work. What for? Nobody knows. Whenever I see a man ploughing a field I think to myself: there he is pouring his strength and his sweat into the earth drop by drop, only to lie down in that very earth at last and rot away. He will die as big an ignoramus as he was born, leaving nothing behind him, having seen nothing but his fields.

"Is that what he was born for—to dig in the soil and die without having had time even to dig himself a grave? Has he ever tasted freedom? Has he a knowledge of the vastness of the steppe? Has his heart ever been cheered by the murmur of the sea? He is a slave—a slave from the day of

his birth to the day of his death. What can he do about it? Nothing but hang himself, if he has the sense to do that.

"As for me, at fifty-eight I have seen so much that if it were all put down on paper, a thousand bags like the one you have there would not hold it all. Can you name a land I have not seen? You cannot. I have been to places you have never even heard of. That is the only way to live—moving from one place to another. And never stop long in one place—why should you? Just see how day and night are always moving, chasing each other round the earth; in just the same way you must chase away your thoughts if you would not lose your zest for life. One is sure to lose it if he broods too much over life. Even I did once; I did indeed, young falcon.

"It was when I was in jail in Galicia. 'Why was I ever born?' I thought in my misery. It is a great misery to be locked up in jail—ekh, what a misery! My heart was gripped as in a vice every time I looked out of the window at the open fields. Who can say why he was born? No one can, and one

should never ask himself such a question. Live, and be thankful to be alive. Roam the earth and see what there is to see, and then you will never be miserable. Ah, but I almost hanged myself with my belt that time.

"Once I had a talk with a certain man. A stern man he was, and a Russian, like you. A person must not live as he likes, he said, but as is pointed out in the word of God. If a man lives in obedience to God, he said, God will give him whatever he asks for. He himself was dressed in rags and tatters. I told him to ask God for a new suit of clothes. He was so angry he cursed me and drove me away. But just a minute before he had said one ought to love his neighbours and forgive them. Why did he not forgive me if I had offended him? There's your preacher for you! They teach people to eat less, while they themselves eat ten times a day."

He spat into the fire and was silent as he refilled his pipe. The wind moaned softly, the horses whinnied in the darkness, and the tender impassioned strains of a song came from the Gipsy camp. It was Nonka, Makar's

beautiful daughter, who was singing. I recognized the deep throaty timbre of her voice, in which there was always a note of command and of discontent, whether she was singing a song or merely saying a word of greeting. The haughtiness of a queen was frozen upon her swarthy face, and in the shadows of her dark eyes glimmered a consciousness of her irresistible beauty and a contempt for everything that was not she.

Makar handed me his pipe.

"Have a smoke. She sings well, doesn't she? Would you like to have a maid like that fall in love with you? No? Good for you. Put no faith in women and keep away from them. A maid gets more joy out of kissing a man than I do out of smoking my pipe. But once you have kissed her, gone is your freedom. She holds you with invisible bonds that are not to be broken, and you give yourself to her heart and soul. That is the truth. Beware of the maids. They always lie. She swears she loves you above all else, but the first time you cause her a pin-prick she will tear your heart out. I know what I say. There are many things I know. If you wish, I will tell

you a true tale. Remember it well, and if you do, you will be as free as a bird all your life.

"Once upon a time there was a young Gipsy named Zobar—Loiko Zobar. He was a fearless youth whose fame had spread throughout Hungary and Bohemia and Slavonia and all the lands that encircle the sea. There was not a village in those parts but had four or five men sworn to take Zobar's life, yet he went on living, and if he took a fancy to a horse, a regiment of soldiers could not keep him from galloping off on it. Was there a soul he feared? Not Zobar. He would knife the devil himself and all his pack if they swooped down on him, or at least he would curse them roundly and give them a cuffing, you can be sure of that.

"All the Gipsy camps knew Zobar or had heard of him. The only thing he loved was a horse, and that not for long. When he had tired of riding it he would sell it and give the money to anyone who asked him for it. There was nothing he prized; he would have ripped his heart out of his breast if he thought anyone had need of it. That was the sort of man he was.

"At the time I am speaking of—some ten years ago—our caravan was roaming through Bukovina. A group of us were sitting together one spring night—Danilo, a soldier who fought under Kossuth; old Nur; Radda, Danilo's daughter, and others.

"Have you seen my Nonka? She is a queen among beauties. But it would be doing her too great an honour to compare her with Radda. No words could describe Radda's beauty. Perhaps it could be played on a violin, but only by one who knew the instrument as he knew his own soul.

"Many a man pined away with love for Radda. Once in Moravia a rich old man was struck dumb by the sight of her. There he sat on his horse staring at her and shaking all over as if with the ague. He was decked out like the devil on holiday, his Ukrainian coat all stitched in gold, the sabre at his side set with precious stones that flashed like lightning at every movement of his horse, the blue velvet of his cap like a patch of blue sky. He was a very important person, that old man. He sat on and on staring at Radda, and at last he said to her: 'A purse full of money

for a kiss!' She just turned her head away. This made the rich old man change his tune. 'Forgive me if I have insulted you, but you might at least give me a smile,' and with this he tossed his purse at her feet, and a fat purse it was. But she just pressed it into the dust with her foot, as if she had not noticed it.

"'Ah, what a maid!' he gasped, bringing his whip down on his horse's flank so that the dust of the roadway rose in a cloud as the horse reared.

"He came back on the next day. 'Who is her father?' he asked in a voice that echoed throughout the camp. Danilo came forward. 'Sell me your daughter. Name your own price.' 'It is only gentlemen who sell anything from their pigs to their consciences,' said Danilo. 'As for me, I fought under Kossuth and sell nothing.' The rich man let out a roar and reached for his sabre, but someone thrust a lighted tinder into his horse's ear and the beast went flying off with its master on its back. We broke camp and took to the road. When we had been on the way two whole days, we suddenly saw him coming after us. 'Hey!'

he cried. 'I swear to God and to you that my intentions are honest. Give me the maid to wife. I will share all that I own with you, and I am very rich.' He was aflame with passion and swayed in his saddle like feather-grass in the wind. We thought over what he said.

"'Well, daughter, speak up,' muttered Danilo into his beard.

"'If the eagle's mate went to nest with the crow of her own free will, what would you think of her?' said Radda.

"Danilo burst out laughing and so did the rest of us.

"'Well said, daughter! Have you heard, my lord? Your case is lost! Woo a pigeon—they are more docile.' And we went on our way.

"At that the rich man pulled off his hat and hurled it down on the ground and rode off at such speed that the earth shook under his horse's hoofs. That was what Radda was like, young falcon.

"Again one night we were sitting in camp when all of a sudden we heard music coming from the steppe. Wonderful music. Music that made

the blood throb in your veins and lured you off to unknown places. It filled us all with a longing for something so tremendous that if we once experienced it there would be no more reason to go on living, and if we did go on living, it would be as lords of the whole world.

"Then a horse came out of the darkness, and on the horse a man was sitting and playing the fiddle. He came to a halt by our campfire and stopped playing, looking at us and smiling.

"'Zobar! So it is you!' called out Danilo heartily.

"This, then, was Loiko Zobar. His moustaches swept down to his shoulders, where they mingled with his curly hair; his eyes shone like two bright stars, and his smile was the sun itself. It was as if he and his horse had been carved of one piece. There he was, red as blood in the fire-light, his teeth flashing when he laughed. Damned if I did not love him as I loved my own self, and he had not so much as exchanged a word with me or even noticed my existence.

"There *are* people like that, young falcon.

When he looked into your eyes your soul surrendered to him, and instead of being ashamed of this, you were proud of it. You seemed to become better in his presence. There are not many people like that. Perhaps it is better so. If there were a lot of good things in the world, they would not be counted good. But listen to what happened next.

"Radda said to him: 'You play well, Zobar. Who made you such a clear-voiced fiddle?' 'I made it myself,' he laughed. 'And not of wood, but of the breast of a maiden I loved well; the strings are her heart-strings. It still plays false at times, my fiddle, but I know how to wield the bow.'

"A man always tries to becloud a girl's eyes with longing for him so that his own heart will be protected from the darts of those eyes. And Zobar was no exception. But he did not know with whom he was dealing this time. Radda merely turned away and said with a yawn: 'And they told me Zobar was wise and witty. What a mistake!' And she walked away.

"'You have sharp teeth, my pretty maid!' said Zobar, his eyes flashing as he got off

his horse. 'Greetings to you, friends. I have come to pay you a visit.'

"'We are glad to have you,' replied Danilo.

"We exchanged kisses, chatted a while and went to bed. We slept soundly. In the morning we found Zobar with a bandage round his head. What had happened? It seems his horse had kicked him in the night.

"Ah, but we knew who that horse had been! And we smiled to ourselves; and Danilo smiled. Could it be that even Zobar was no match for Radda? Not at all. Lovely as she was, she had a petty soul, and all the gold trinkets in the world could not have added one kopek to her worth.

"Well, we went on living in that same place. Things were going well with us, and Loiko Zobar stayed on. He was a good companion—as wise as an old man, and very knowing, and able to read and write Russian as well as Magyar. I could have listened to him talk the night through, and as for his playing—may the lightning strike me dead if there ever was another his equal. He drew his bow once across the strings and the heart leaped up

in your breast; he drew it again and everything within you grew tense with listening—and he just went on playing and smiling. It made you want to laugh and cry at the same time. Now someone was moaning bitterly and crying for help, and it was as if a knife were being turned in your side; now the steppe was telling a tale to the sky—a sad tale. Now a maid was weeping as she said farewell to her lover. Now her lover was calling to her from the steppe. And then, like a bolt from the blue, would come a gay and sweeping tune that made the very sun dance in the sky. That was how he played, young falcon!

"You felt that tune with every fibre of your body, and you became the slave of it. And if at that moment Zobar had called out: 'Out with your knives, comrades!' every man of us would have bared his knife against anyone he pointed out. He could wind a person round his little finger, but everyone loved him dearly. Yet Radda would have nothing to do with him. That was bad enough, but she mocked him besides. She wounded his heart and wounded it badly. He would set his teeth and pull at his moustache, his eyes deeper

than wells, and at times something would flash in them that struck terror into your heart. At night he would go deep into the steppe and his violin would weep there until morning—weep for his lost freedom. And we would lie and listen and think to ourselves: what will happen next? And we knew that when two stones are rolling towards each other, they will crush anything that stands in their way. That was the way things were.

"One night we sat for long round the fire discussing our affairs, and when we got tired of talking, Danilo turned to Zobar and said: 'Sing us a song, Zobar, to cheer our hearts.' Zobar glanced at Radda who was lying on the ground not far away gazing up at the sky, and he drew his bow across the strings. The violin sang out as if the bow were really being drawn over a maiden's heart-strings. And he sang:

Hi ho, hi ho! My heart is aflame,
The steppe is like the sea,
And like the wind, our gallant steeds
Are bearing you and me.

"Radda turned her head to him, propped herself up on one elbow and laughed in his face. Zobar flushed crimson.

Hi ho, hi ho! My comrade true,
The hour of dawn is nigh;
The steppe is wrapped in shades of night,
But we shall climb the sky.
Spur on your horse to meet the day
That glimmers o'er the plain,
But see that lovely Lady Moon
Is touched not by its mane!

"How he sang! No one sings like that nowadays. But Radda murmured under her breath:

"'I would not climb so high if I were you, Loiko Zobar. You might fall down into a puddle and spoil those lovely moustaches of yours.'

"Zobar threw her a furious glance, but said nothing. He was able to control himself and go on singing:

Hi ho, hi ho! If daylight comes
And finds us both asleep,
Our cheeks will burn with crimson shame
As out of bed we leap.

"'A splendid song,' said Danilo. 'Never have I heard a better one; may the devil turn me into a pipe if I have!'

"Old Nur stroked his whiskers and shrugged his shoulders, and all of us were pleased with Zobar's brave song. But Radda did not like it.

"'Once I heard a gnat trying to imitate the eagle's call,' she said. It was as if she had thrown snow in our faces.

"'Perhaps you are longing for a touch of the whip, Radda,' drawled Danilo, but Zobar threw down his cap and said, his face as dark as the earth:

"'Wait, Danilo! A spirited horse needs a steel bridle! Give me your daughter to wife!'

"'A fine speech,' chuckled Danilo. 'Take her, if you can.'

"'Very well,' said Zobar; then, turning to Radda: 'Come down off your high horse, maid, and listen to what I have to say. I have known many a girl in my day—many, I say—but not one of them ever captured my heart as you have. Ah, Radda, you have enslaved my soul. It cannot be helped—what must

be will be, and the horse does not exist that can carry a man away from himself. With God and my own conscience as witness, and in the presence of your father and all these people, I take you to wife. But I warn you not to try to curb my liberty; I am a freedom-loving man and will always live as I please.' And he walked up to her with set teeth and blazing eyes. We saw him stretch his hand out to her, and we thought: at last Radda has put a bridle on the wild colt of the steppe. But suddenly Zobar's arms flew out and he struck the ground with the back of his head.

"What could have happened? It was as if a bullet had struck him in the heart. But it was Radda who had flicked a whip about his legs and jerked it. That was what had made him fall.

"And again she was lying there motionless, a scornful smile on her lips. We watched to see what would happen next. Zobar sat up and held his head in his hands as if he were afraid it would burst, then he got up quietly and went out into the steppe without a glance at anyone. Nur whispered to me: 'You had better keep an eye on him.' And so I

crept after him into the steppe, in the darkness of the night. Think of that, young falcon."

Makar scraped the ashes out of the bowl of his pipe and began to refill it. I pulled my coat tighter about me and lay back, the better to study his aged face, bronzed by sun and wind. He was muttering to himself, emphasizing what he said by shaking his head gravely; his grey moustaches twitched and the wind ruffled his hair. He reminded me of an old oak which has been struck by lightning but is still strong and powerful and proud of its strength. The sea went on whispering to the sand, and the wind carried the sound to the steppe. Nonka had stopped singing. The clouds that had gathered made the autumn night darker than ever.

"Loiko dragged one foot after the other as he walked, his head drooping, his arms hanging as limp as whip-cords, and when he reached the bank of a little stream he sat down on a stone and groaned. The sound of that groan nearly broke my heart, but I did not go near him. Words cannot lessen a man's grief, can they? That is the trouble. He sat

there for an hour, for another, for a third without stirring, just sitting there.

"I lay not far away. The sky had cleared, the moon bathed the whole steppe in silver light so that you could see far, far into the distance.

"Suddenly I caught sight of Radda hurrying towards us from the camp.

"I was overjoyed. 'Good for you, Radda, brave girl!' thought I. She came up to Zobar without his hearing her. She put her hand on his shoulder. He started, unclasped his hands and raised his head. Instantly he was on his feet and had seized his knife. God, he'll kill her, I thought, and was about to jump up and raise the alarm when I heard:

"'Drop it or I'll blow your head off!' I looked: there was Radda with a pistol in her hand aimed at Loiko's head. A very daughter of Satan, that girl! Well, I thought, at least they are matched in strength; I wonder what will happen next.

"'I did not come to kill you, but to make peace,' said Radda, pushing the pistol into her belt. 'Put away your knife.' He put it away and gazed at her with fuming eyes.

What a sight that was! These two staring at each other like infuriated beasts, both of them so fine and brave! And nobody saw them but the bright moon and me.

"'Listen, Zobar, I love you,' said Radda. He did nothing but shrug his shoulders, like a man bound hand and foot.

"'Many a man have I seen, but you are the bravest and handsomest of all. Any one of them would have shaved off his moustaches had I asked him to; any one of them would have fallen at my feet had I wanted him to. But why should I? None of them were brave, and with me they would soon have gone womanish. There are few brave Gipsies left, Zobar—very few. Never yet have I loved anyone, Zobar. But I love you. And I love freedom, too. I love my freedom even more than I love you. But I cannot live without you any more than you can live without me. And I want you to be mine—mine in soul and body, do you hear?'

"Zobar gave a little laugh. 'I hear,' he said. 'It cheers my heart to hear what you say. Speak on.'

"'This is what else I would say, Zobar: do what you will, I shall possess you; you

are sure to be mine. And so waste no more time. My kisses and caresses are awaiting you—and I shall kiss you passionately, Zobar! Under the spell of my kisses you will forget all the brave life of the past. No longer will your gay songs, so beloved by the Gipsies, resound in the steppe; now shall you sing soft love songs to me alone—to Radda. Waste no more time. This have I said, which means that from tomorrow on you will serve me as devotedly as a youth serves an elder comrade. And you will bow at my feet before the whole camp and kiss my right hand, and then only shall I be your wife.'

"This, then, was what that devilish girl was after. Never had such a thing been heard of. True, old people said that such a custom was held among the Montenegrins in ancient times, but it never existed among the Gipsies. Could you think of anything more preposterous, young man? Not if you racked your brains a whole year.

"Zobar recoiled and the steppe rang with his cry—the cry of one who has been mortally wounded. Radda shuddered, but did not betray her feelings.

"'Good-bye until tomorrow, and tomorrow you will do what I have said, do you hear, Zobar?'

"'I hear. I shall do it,' groaned Zobar and held out his arms to her, but she went away without so much as glancing at him, and he swayed like a tree broken by the wind, and he fell on the ground, sobbing and laughing.

"That was what she did to him, that accursed Radda. I could hardly bring him back to his senses.

"Why should people have to suffer so? Does anyone find pleasure in hearing the groans of one whose heart is broken? Alas, it is a great mystery.

"When I got back to camp I told the old men what had taken place. We considered the matter and decided to wait and see what would happen. And this is what happened. In the evening when we had gathered about the fire as usual, Zobar joined us. He was looking downcast, he had grown haggard in that one night and his eyes were sunken. He kept them fixed on the ground and did not raise them once as he said:

"'This is how things are, comrades. I

searched my heart this night and found no room in it for the freedom-loving life I have always lived. Radda has taken up every corner of it. There she is, the beautiful Radda, smiling her queenly smile. She loves freedom more than she loves me, but I love her more than I love freedom, and so I have decided to bow before her as she ordered me to, that all shall see how her beauty has enslaved the brave Loiko Zobar who, until he met her, played with women as a cat plays with mice. For this she will become my wife and will kiss and caress me, and I shall lose all desire to sing songs to you and I shall not pine for the loss of my freedom. Is that how it is to be, Radda?' He raised his eyes and looked at her grimly. She nodded without a word and pointed to the ground in front of her. We could not imagine how this had been brought about. We even felt an urge to get up and go away so as not to see Loiko Zobar throw himself at the feet of a maid, even though that maid be Radda. There was something shameful in it, something very sad.

"'Well?' cried Radda to Zobar.

"'Do not be in so great a hurry. There is

plenty of time—time enough to grow tired of me,' laughed Zobar. And his laugh had the ring of steel.

"'So that is how things are, comrades. What is left for me to do? The only thing left for me to do is to see whether my Radda's heart is as strong as she would have us think. I shall test it. Forgive me.'

"And before we had time to guess what he was up to, Radda was lying on the ground with Zobar's curved knife plunged into her breast up to the handle. We were dumbstruck.

"But Radda pulled out the knife, tossed it aside, held a lock of her black hair to the wound, and smiled as she said in a loud clear voice:

"'Farewell, Zobar. I knew you would do this.' And with that she died.

"Do you see what the maid was like, young man? A devilish maid if there ever was one, so help me God.

"'Now I shall throw myself at your feet, my proud queen,' said Zobar in a voice that rang out over the steppe. And throwing himself on the ground, he pressed his lips to the feet of the dead Radda and lay there

without stirring. We bared our heads and stood in silence.

"What is to be said at a moment like that? Nothing. Nur murmured: 'Bind the fellow,' but nobody would raise a hand to bind Loiko Zobar; not a soul would do it, and Nur knew this. So he turned and walked away. Danilo picked up the knife Radda had tossed away and stood staring at it for some time, his grey whiskers twitching; there were still traces of Radda's blood on the blade, which was curved and sharp. Then Danilo went over to Zobar and plunged the knife into his back over the heart. After all, he was Radda's father, was the old soldier Danilo.

"'You've done it,' said Loiko clearly, turning to Danilo, and then he went to join Radda.

"We stood looking at them. There lay Radda, pressing her hair to her breast with her hand, her wide-open eyes gazing up into the blue sky, while at her feet lay the brave Loiko Zobar. His curly hair had fallen over his face, hiding it from us.

"For some time we stood there lost in thought. Old Danilo's whiskers were quivering and

his thick brows were drawn. He looked up at the sky and said not a word, but hoary-haired Nur had thrown himself on the ground and his body was shaking with sobs.

"And there was good cause to cry, young falcon.

"The moral is, let nothing lure you off the path you have taken. Keep going straight ahead; then, perhaps, you will not come to a bad end.

"And that is the whole story, young falcon."

Makar stopped talking, slipped his pipe into his tobacco pouch, and pulled his coat over his chest. A fine rain was falling and the wind was stronger. The waves broke with a dull angry rumble. One by one the horses came up to our dying fire, gazed at us with big intelligent eyes, then ranged themselves in a ring about us.

"Hi, hi!" Makar called to them affectionately, and when he had patted the neck of his favourite black, he turned to me and said: "Time to go to sleep." He wrapped himself from head to foot in his Caucasian coat, stretched out on the ground and lay still.

I had no desire to sleep. I sat there gazing into the darkness of the steppe, and before my eyes floated the image of Radda, so proud, so imperious, so lovely. She was pressing the hand with the hair in it to her breast, and from between the slender dark fingers oozed drops of blood that turned into fiery stars as they struck the ground.

And behind her floated the brave figure of Loiko Zobar. Locks of curly black hair covered his face, and from under the hair streamed big cold tears.

The rain increased and the sea sang a solemn dirge to these two handsome Gipsies—Loiko Zobar and Radda, daughter of the old soldier Danilo.

And the two of them whirled round and round, soundlessly, gracefully, in the darkness of the night, and try as he might the handsome Zobar could not overtake the proud Radda.

1892

AT THE SALT MARSH

I

"Go to the salt marsh, mate. You can always get a job there. Any time at all. Because it's such damned hard work nobody can stick it long. They run away. Can't stand it. So you go and try it for a day or two. They pay something like seven kopeks a barrow. Enough to live on for a day."

The fisherman who gave me this advice spat, gazed out at the blue horizon of the sea, and hummed a dreary tune to himself. I was sitting beside him in the shade of a fishing shack. He was mending his duck trousers, yawning and mumbling cheerless observations about there not being enough

jobs to go round and what a lot of work it took to find work.

"When it gets too much for you, come here and have a rest. Tell us about it. It's not far away—about five versts. Hm. A queer life, this."

I took my leave of him, thanked him for his advice, and set out along the shore for the salt marsh. It was a hot August morning, the sky was clear and bright, the sea quiet and gentle, its green waves running up on the sand of the shore one after another with a mournful little plash. In the blue mist far up ahead of me I could see white patches on the yellow sand of the shore. That was the town of Ochakov. Behind me the shack was swallowed up by bright-yellow dunes tinted with the aquamarine of the sea.

In the shack where I had spent the night I had listened to all sorts of preposterous stories and opinions which had put me in a very low mood. The sound of the waves was in harmony with my mood and served to intensify it.

Soon the salt marsh came into view. Three plots of land, each about 400 metres square

and separated by low ridges and narrow ditches, represented the three phases of salt-digging. The first plot was flooded with sea water which, as it evaporated, left a layer of pale-grey salt tinged with pink. On the second plot the salt was being gathered into piles. The women with spades in their hands who did this stood knee-deep in glistening black mud without talking or calling to one another, their drab grey forms moving listlessly against the background of the thick, saline, caustic *rapp*, as this mud is called here. On the third plot the salt was being removed. Bent in two over their barrows, workmen plodded numbly and dumbly ahead. The wheels of the barrows scraped and squeaked, and the sound was like a rasping, mournful appeal to Heaven sent up by the long line of bare human backs. And Heaven poured down an insufferable heat that scorched the parched grey earth spotted with salt-marsh grasses and glittering salt crystals. Above the monotonous creaking of the barrows could be heard the deep voice of the foreman cursing the workmen who emptied their barrows of salt at his feet.

His job was to pour water out of a pail over it and then build it up into an elongated pyramid. He was a tall man, dark as an African, and wearing a blue shirt and full white trousers. From where he stood on a heap of salt waving his spade in the air, he kept shouting at the men who were pushing their barrows up the planks:

"Empty it to the left! To the left, you hairy devil! Damn your hide! What you want's a good jab in both eyes! Where you going, you scorpion?"

Viciously he wiped his sweating face with the hem of his shirt, grunted, and, without interrupting his swearing for a minute, undertook to level the salt by striking it with the back of his spade with all his might. The workmen automatically pushed up their barrows and as automatically emptied them in obedience to his commands: "To the right! To the left!" This done, they would straighten up with an effort and turn back for another load, walking with uncertain steps down the shaking planks half-buried in thick black ooze, dragging their barrows that now creaked less noisily but more wearily.

"Put some pepper in it, you bastards!" the foreman would shout after them.

They went on working in the same cowed silence, but sometimes anger and resentment was evinced in the twitching of their sullen exhausted faces smeared with dust and sweat. One of the barrows would occasionally slip off the plank and sink in the mud; the forward barrows would move away from it; the barrows behind would come to a halt while the ragged and grimy tramps holding them would stand gazing with dull indifference as their mate struggled to lift the sixteen-pood load and put it back on the plank.

Out of a cloudless sky the sun blazed down through a haze of heat. It pressed its torrid attentions upon the earth with increasing ardour, as if this day of all others was the one on which it must prove its devotion.

When I had taken this in, I decided to try my luck at getting a job. Assuming a nonchalant air, I walked over to the plank down which workmen were dragging empty barrows.

"Greetings, mates. Good luck to you."

The response was utterly unexpected. The

first workman, a sturdy grey-haired old man with trousers rolled to the knee and sleeves to the shoulder, exposing a sinewy bronzed body, did not hear me and walked past without paying me any notice. The second workman, a young chap with brown hair and grey eyes, threw me a hostile glance and made a face, throwing in a coarse oath for good measure. The third—evidently a Greek, for he was as brown as a beetle and had curly hair—expressed his regret that his hands were occupied and therefore he could not introduce his fist to my nose. This was said in a tone of indifference inconsonant with the desire expressed. The fourth shouted at the top of his lungs: "Hullo, glass-eye!" and tried to give me a kick.

If I am not mistaken, this was what in refined society is called getting "a cold reception," and never before had I been given it in such striking form. In my chagrin I unconsciously took off my glasses and put them in my pocket, then made my way to the foreman to ask him if he could give me work. Before I had reached him he shouted at me:

"Hey, you, what do you want? A job?"

I told him I did.

"Have you ever worked with a barrow?"

I said I had hauled dirt.

"Dirt? That don't count. Dirt's a different story. We haul salt here, not dirt. You can go to the devil and stay there. Come on, Funny-Bones, dump it right here at my feet."

And Funny-Bones, a lumpish Hercules with trailing moustaches and a pimply purple nose, gave a tremendous grunt and emptied his barrow. The salt poured out. Funny-Bones swore, the foreman out-swore him, both of them smiled approvingly and turned to me.

"Well, what do you want?" asked the foreman.

"Maybe you've come to get some salt for your pancakes, *katsap*?"[1] said Funny-Bones, winking at the foreman.

I urged the foreman to take me on, assuring him that I would soon get used to the work and keep up with the others.

[1] *Katsap*—derogatory nickname for a Russian.—*Tr.*

"You'll break your back before you get used to this work. But what the hell, go ahead. But I won't pay you more than fifty kopeks the first day. Hey there, give him a barrow!"

Out of nowhere appeared a half-naked boy, his bare legs bound to the knee with dirty rags.

"Come along," he muttered after glancing at me sceptically.

I followed him to where some barrows were heaped one on top of another and set about choosing the lightest for myself. The boy stood scratching his legs and watching me.

When I had made my choice he said: "Look what you've took. Can't you see the wheel's crooked?"—and with that he walked away and stretched out on the ground.

I selected another barrow and joined the other workmen who were going for salt, but I was oppressed by a vague uneasiness that kept me from speaking to my fellow-workmen. The faces of all of them expressed weariness and annoyance that was very definite, though as yet disguised. The men were worn

out and furious: furious with the sun for mercilessly scorching their skin, with the planks for sagging under their barrows, with the *rapp*—that vile ooze, thick and salty and full of sharp crystals—for lacerating their feet and then eating into the wounds until they became running sores—in a word, with everything about them. This fury could be detected in the overt glances they stole at each other, and in the curses that now and then came from their parched throats. No one paid the least attention to me. But when we entered the plot and moved along the planks towards the four heaps of salt, I suddenly felt a blow on the back of my leg and turned to have someone hurl in my face:

"Pick your feet up, clumsy!"

I made haste to pick my feet up, then put down my barrow and began shovelling salt into it.

"Pile it on," ordered the Ukrainian Hercules who was standing beside me.

I filled it as full as I could. At that moment the fellows behind shouted to those in front: "Get going!" Those in front spat on their

hands and lifted their barrows with loud grunts, bending almost double and straining forward with their necks stretched out as if that lightened the load.

In imitation of their methods, I, too, bent over as far as I could and strained forward. I lifted the barrow. The wheel gave a screech, my collar-bone seemed about to snap, and the muscles of my arms quivered from strain. I took one faltering step, then another. . . . I was thrown to the right, to the left, jerked ahead . . . the wheel of the barrow ran off the plank and I went flying face down into the mud. The barrow gave me an edifying fillip on the head with its handle and then turned slowly upside down. The piercing whistles, the cries, and the shouts of laughter that accompanied my fall seemed to press me further down into the thick warm muck, and as I floundered in it, vainly trying to lift the bogged barrow, I felt a sharp pain in my chest.

"Lend a hand, friend," I said to the Ukrainian who was standing beside me holding his sides and rocking back and forth with laughter.

"You mud-sucking bastard! Gone wading, eh? Hoist it back on the plank. Push down on the left side! Tch, tch! The *rapp* will suck you down if you don't watch out." And again he laughed till the tears came, gasping and holding his sides.

The grey-haired old man in front glanced at me and dismissed me with a wave of his hand.

"Why the hell couldn't he keep to the boards?" he said, and went on with his barrow, grunting angrily.

The men in front continued on their way; those behind watched ill-humouredly as I struggled to extricate my barrow. The mud and sweat were pouring off me. No one offered to help me. From the salt-heap came the voice of the foreman:

"What's the hold-up, you devils? You dogs. You swine. Out of sight, out of mind, eh? Get a move on, God damn you!"

"Make way," barked the Ukrainian behind me, almost striking me on the head with the side of his barrow as he lumbered past.

Left alone, I pulled the barrow out somehow, and since it was empty now and

plastered all over with mud, I ran it off the plot with the intention of exchanging it for another.

"Took a flyer, mate? Don't mind; that happens to everybody at first."

I glanced round to see a chap of about twenty squatting on a board in the mud beside a salt-heap. He was sucking the palm of his hand. He nodded to me, and the eyes that glanced through his fingers were kindly and smiling.

"I don't mind. I'll catch on soon. What's the matter with your hand?" I asked.

"Just a little scratch, but the salt eats into it. If you don't suck it out you might just as well quit the job—you won't be able to use your hand. But you'd better get back to work before the foreman starts shouting at you."

I went back. I had no accident with the second load; I hauled a third and a fourth and then two more. No one paid the slightest attention to me, and I was deeply gratified by this circumstance, which ordinarily I would have regretted.

"Time for dinner," someone cried.

With a sigh of relief the men went to have their dinner, but even then they displayed no enthusiasm, no joy in the opportunity to rest. Everything they did was done reluctantly, with suppressed anger and disgust. It was as if rest could bring no pleasure to bones racked by labour, to muscles exhausted by heat. My back ached, so did my legs and my shoulders, but I tried not to show it and walked briskly over to the soup pot.

"Hold on there," said a grim old workman in a ragged blue blouse. His face was as blue as his blouse from drink, and he had heavy scowling eyebrows from under which flashed inflamed eyes, fierce and mocking.

"Hold on there. What's your name?"

I told him.

"Hm. Your father was a fool to give you a name like that. Maxims aren't allowed to go near the soup pot the first day. Maxims live on their own food the first day, see? It would be different if you was named Ivan or something else. Take me, for instance. My name's Matvei, and so I get dinner. But not Maxim. He can only watch me eat. Get away from that pot!"

I looked at him in astonishment, then walked away and sat down on the ground. I was astounded by such treatment. Never before had I experienced anything like it and certainly I had done nothing to deserve it. Dozens of times before this I had had occasion to join groups of workmen, and our relations had always been simple and comradely from the very first. There was something strange about all this, and my curiosity was aroused despite the insult and injury I had suffered. I made up my mind to discover the answer to this mystery, and, having resolved on this, I was outwardly composed as I watched the others eat and waited to go back to work. It was essential to find out why I had been treated so.

II

At last they finished eating, finished belching, and began to smoke as they strolled away from the pot. The Ukrainian Hercules and the boy with the bandaged legs came over and sat down in front of me, cutting

off my view of the line of barrows left on the planks.

"Want a smoke, mate?" asked the Ukrainian.

"Thanks, I wouldn't mind," I replied.

"Haven't you got any tobacco of your own?"

"If I had, I wouldn't take yours."

"True enough. Here," and he gave me his pipe. "Going to keep on working?"

"Yes, as long as I'm able."

"Hm. Where you from?"

I told him.

"Is that far from here?"

"About three thousand versts."

"Oho! Pretty far. What brought you here?"

"Same thing as brought you."

"So you were driven out of your village for stealing, too?"

"What's that?" I asked, realizing I had been trapped.

"I came here because I was driven out of my village for stealing, and you said you had come for the same reason," and he burst out laughing, delighted to have caught me.

His companion said nothing, only winked at him and smiled slyly.

"Wait—" I began.

"No time to wait, mate. Got to get back to work. Come along. Take my barrow and line up behind me. Mine's a good dependable barrow. Come along."

And off he went. I was about to take his barrow when he put in hastily: "Here, I'll take it myself. Let me have yours; I'll put mine in it and give it a ride—let it rest up a bit."

My suspicions were aroused. As I walked beside him I studied his barrow, which was lying upside down in mine, to make sure that some trick was not being played on me, but the only thing I noticed was that I had suddenly become the centre of attention. Efforts were made to conceal this, but I could tell it by the frequent winks and nods in my direction and all the whispering that was going on. I knew that I must be on my guard and supposed that, judging from what had gone on before, whatever was being schemed was highly original.

"Here we are," said the Ukrainian, taking

his barrow out of mine and pushing it towards me. "Fill it up."

I glanced round. Everyone was hard at work, and so I, too, began to shovel in the salt. There was no other sound but the rustle of the salt as it fell off the spades, and I found the silence oppressive. I was convinced that I would do well to get away from here.

"That's enough. Have you fallen asleep? Get going," ordered blue-faced Matvei.

I grasped the handles of the barrow and with a tremendous effort pushed it forward. A sharp pain made me cry out and drop the barrow. This caused more pain, worse than the first: I had ripped the skin off both palms. Clenching my teeth in pain and anger, I examined the handles and saw that they had been split at the outer edge and chips of wood inserted to hold the crack open. So skilfully had this been done that it could hardly be detected. It had been calculated that when I grasped the handles tightly the chips would fly out and my flesh would be caught as the wood came together. The calculation proved correct. I raised my head and looked about me. Cries, hoots, jeers

slapped me in the face, and all around me I saw ugly, gloating grins. From the salt-heap came the coarse oaths of the foreman, but nobody cared; they were too much taken up by me. I looked about me blankly, dazedly, conscious that I was seething inside with a sense of hurt, with hatred for these men, and with a desire to get revenge. The men crowded in front of me, laughing and swearing, and I wanted terribly—excruciatingly—to insult and humiliate them.

"You beasts!" I cried, shaking my fists as I advanced and cursing them as vilely as they had cursed me.

A tremor passed through the crowd and they retreated uneasily. But the Ukrainian Hercules and the blue-faced Matvei stood their ground and began to roll up their sleeves calmly.

"Come on, come on," murmured the Ukrainian with relish, not taking his eyes off me.

"Give it to him, Gavrilla," urged Matvei.

"What did you do that to me for?" I cried. "What have I ever done to you? Aren't I a man like the rest of you?" I shouted some other stupid, absurd, senseless words and trembled all over with fury, at the same

time keeping a sharp eye out to see that no more tricks were played on me.

But the vapid faces turned to me were not so lacking in sympathy now, and some of them wore an expression almost of guilt. Even Matvei and the Ukrainian moved back a step or two. Matvei began to pluck at his blouse and the Ukrainian to rummage in his pockets.

"What did you do it for? What made you?" I insisted.

They maintained a blank silence. The Ukrainian toyed with a cigarette, his eyes fixed on the ground. Matvei walked off until he was farther away from me than anyone else. The others scratched their heads glumly and turned back to their barrows. The foreman came up, shouting and shaking his fists. All this happened so quickly that the women raking the salt, who had stopped work on hearing my cry, reached us only when the workmen had gone back to their barrows. I was left alone with a bitter sense that my wrong was undeserved and unavenged. This made it all the harder to bear. I wanted an answer to my question; I wanted revenge. And so I shouted:

"Just a minute, mates!"

They stopped and looked at me sullenly.

"Tell me why you hurt me so. Surely you have a conscience."

Still they were silent, and this silence was their answer. More composed now, I began to speak to them. I began by saying I was a man like themselves; that, like them, I had to eat, and so had to work; that I had joined them as an equal, for we were united by a common fate; that I did not look down upon them or think myself above them.

"We are all equal," I said, "and we ought to understand one another and help one another in any way we can."

They stood there listening attentively, although they avoided my eye. I saw that my words affected them, and this inspired me. A glance round at them convinced me of this. I was filled with a bright and poignant joy, and, throwing myself down on a heap of salt, I wept. Who would not?

When I raised my head I was alone. The working day was over and the workmen, in groups of five or six, were sitting near the salt-heap, forming big dark smudges on the

rosy background of sunlit salt. It was very quiet. A breeze came from the sea. A little white cloud was sailing slowly across the sky; little wisps of mist broke away from it and dissolved in the blue expanse. It was all very sad. . . .

I got up and went towards the salt-heap with the firm intention of taking my leave and going back to the fishing shack. Matvei, the Ukrainian, the foreman, and three other solid middle-aged rough-necks got up as I approached and came to meet me, and before I had a chance to say a word Matvei held out his hand and said, without looking at me:

"Here's what, mate: you'd better quit and go your way. We've collected a little sum to help you. Take it."

Some copper coins lay in his hand, which shook as he held it out to me. I was so taken aback that I could only stare at them. They stood with hanging heads, silently, foolishly pulling at their rags, shifting from one foot to the other, glancing about furtively, jerking their shoulders, their every movement revealing extreme discomfiture and a desire to have done with me as soon as possible.

"I won't take it," I said, pushing Matvei's hand away.

"Come, don't offend us. We're really not such a bad lot. We know we hurt your feelings, but, when you come right down to it, are we to blame? No, we're not. It's the way we live that's to blame. What sort of a life do we live? A dog's life. The sixteen-pood barrow, the *rapp* gnawing at your feet, the sun scorching your back all day long, and—fifty kopeks a day. It's enough to turn any man into a beast. Work, work, work, drink up your pay, and back to work again. And that's the beginning and the end of it. When you've lived like this for five years—well, there you are—nothing human left—a beast, and that's that. Listen, mate, we do worse things to each other than we did to you; and we're chums, so to speak, while you're a newcomer. Why should we be easy on you? So there you are. The things you said to us—well, what of it? You put it right—it's all true—but it don't fit us. You oughtn't to take it so hard. We were just fooling. And after all, we do have hearts. You'd better go away; you think your way, we think ours. Take

this little mite and good-bye, mate. We've done you no wrong, and you've done us none. It's true things turned out bad, but what do you expect? They never turn out good with us. And there's no point in your staying on here. You just don't fit in. We've got used to each other, and you—you're not our kind. Nothing will come of it. So you'd better go. Go your own way. Good-bye."

I looked round at them. Clearly they all agreed with Matvei, so I tossed my knapsack over my shoulder and was about to leave.

"Just a minute, let me put in a word," said the Ukrainian, laying a hand on my shoulder. "If it was anyone but you I'd give him a punch in the jaw as a keepsake. But nobody's touching you, and we've even made you a present. You might say thank you for it." He spat and began twirling his tobacco pouch, as much as to say: just see what a clever fellow I am!

Crushed by all this, I hastened to take my leave. Once more I set out along the edge of the sea, this time for the fishing shack where I had spent the night. The sky was clear and hot, the sea empty and majestic. Little

green waves came rolling noisily over the beach. For some reason I felt unspeakably hurt and ashamed. Slowly I dragged my feet over the hot sand. The sea gleamed tranquilly in the sun, the waves murmured something sad and incomprehensible. . . .

When I reached the shack the fisherman of my acquaintance got up to meet me.

"Not to your taste, that salt, eh?" he said with the satisfaction of one whose predictions have turned out to be correct.

I looked at him without a word.

"A little too much salt," he said emphatically. "Hungry? Go and have some porridge. Don't know why they made so damned much —half of it's left. Get your spoon going. First-rate porridge, with flounder and sturgeon in it."

Two minutes later I was sitting in the shade outside the shack, very dirty, very tired and hungry, eating a cheerless meal of porridge with flounder and sturgeon in it.

1893

OLD IZERGIL

I

THESE STORIES were told to me on the shore of the sea near Akkerman, in Bessarabia.

One evening, when our grape-picking was over for the day, the group of Moldavians with whom I had been working went down to the sea-shore, leaving me and an old woman named Izergil lying in the deep shadow of the grape-vines, silently watching the silhouettes of the people who had gone down to the shore merge with the blue shadows of night.

They sang and laughed as they went; the men were bronzed by the sun, they had thick black moustaches and curly hair that hung down to their shoulders, and they were wear-

ing short jackets and wide trousers tight at the ankle; the girls and women were gay, they had dark-blue eyes and graceful bodies, and their skins were as bronzed as the men's. Their silky black hair hung loose and the warm breeze played with it, making the coins plaited into it tinkle. The wind flowed over us in a broad continuous current, but from time to time it seemed to come up against some obstacle, and then there would be a great gust that blew out the women's hair, making it stream about their heads in fantastic manes. This gave them the appearance of strange creatures out of fairy-tales. As they went farther and farther away, the night and my imagination clothed them in increasing beauty.

Someone was playing a violin, a girl was singing in a deep throaty voice, bursts of laughter could be heard. . . .

The air was heavy with the tang of the sea and the vapours rising from the earth, which had been drenched by rain just before nightfall. Even now tattered storm-clouds were meandering across the sky in odd forms and colourings—here they were vague, like col-

umns of smoke, grey and ashen-blue; there they were mottled black and brown and as sharp as fragments of rock. And between them gleamed the tender night sky dotted with gold. All of this—the sounds and the smells, the clouds and the people—was sad and beautiful and seemed to be the introduction to a marvellous tale. It was as if everything had been checked in its growth and was dying. The sound of the voices faded away as they receded, becoming nothing but mournful sighs.

"Why did you not go with them?" asked old Izergil, nodding in the direction of the sea.

She had become bent in two by time, her eyes, once shining black, were now dull and rheumy. And she had a strange voice—it sounded as if her tongue were made of crunching bone.

"I did not wish to," I replied.

"You Russians are born old. All of you are as gloomy as demons. Our girls are afraid of you. But you, my lad, are young and strong."

The moon came up. Large, round and blood-red, it seemed to have emerged from the bowels

of that steppe which had swallowed up so much human flesh and blood; this, perhaps, was why it was so rich and fertile. The old woman and I were caught in the lacy shadow of the leaves as in a net. Across the steppe, which extended to our left, flitted cloud shadows made pale and transparent by the blue moonshine.

"Look, there goes Larra!"

I turned to where the old woman pointed a crooked shaking finger and saw the shadows moving—there were many of them, and one, darker than the others, was travelling faster; it was cast by a wisp of cloud sailing closer to the earth and more swiftly than its sisters.

"There is no one there," I said.

"You are blinder than me, an old woman. Look. Do you not see something dark fleeing across the steppe?"

I looked again, and again saw nothing but shadows.

"It is only a shadow. Why do you call it Larra?"

"Because it is Larra. A shadow is all that is left of him, and no wonder—he has been living for thousands of years. The sun

has dried up his flesh and blood and bones and the wind has scattered them like dust. Just see how God can punish a man for his pride!"

"Tell me the story," I said to the old woman, anticipating one of those delightful tales born of the steppe.

And she told me the story.

"Many thousands of years have passed since this took place. Far across the sea, in the place where the sun rises, is a land where a great river flows, and in that land every leaf and blade of grass casts a shadow large enough to protect a man from the sun, which pours down mercilessly there.

"That is how generous the earth is in that land.

"A tribe of powerful people once lived there; they tended their flocks and displayed great strength and courage in hunting wild animals, and they feasted when the hunt was over, singing songs and making merry with the maids.

"One day, during such a feast, an eagle flew out of the sky and carried off a black-

haired maiden as lovely as the night. The arrows the men sent after the bird fell back on the ground without injuring it. And so the men set out in search of the maiden, but they could not find her. And in time she was forgotten, as everything on this earth is forgotten."

The old woman drew a deep breath and grew silent. When she spoke in her crackling voice it was as if she were voicing the sentiments of all the forgotten ages embodied in the shades of remembrance dwelling in her breast. Softly the sea echoed the introduction to this ancient legend which may have had beginning on these very shores.

"But in twenty years she herself came back, worn and wizened, and with her was a youth as strong and handsome as she had been twenty years before. And when she was asked where she had been, she replied that the eagle had carried her off to the mountains and had lived with her there as his wife. This was their son. The eagle was no more; on feeling his strength ebbing he had soared high into the sky for the last time, and, folding his wings, had plunged to his death upon the jagged cliffs.

"Everyone gazed in amazement at the son of the eagle, and they saw that he in no way differed from them except that his eyes had the cold proud gleam of the king of birds. When they addressed him, he sometimes did not deign to reply, and when the elders of the tribe approached him, he spoke to them as their equal. This they took as an insult, and they called him an unfeathered arrow with an unsharpened tip, and they told him that thousands like him and thousands twice his age paid them homage and obeyed their commands. But he looked them boldly in the eye and said that there were no others like himself; let others pay them homage if they wished, but he had no mind to. Oh, then the elders were angry indeed, and in their anger they said:

"'There can be no place for him among us. Let him go wherever he wishes.'

"He laughed and went where he wished: he went over to a fair maid who had been studying him intently, and he took her in his arms. And she was the daughter of one of the elders who had reproved him. And although he was very handsome, she thrust

him away, for she was afraid of her father. She thrust him away and walked off, and he struck her mightily, and when she fell down he stamped upon her breast until the blood spurted out of her mouth as high as the sky, and the maiden gave a great sigh and writhed like a snake and died.

"Those who saw this happen were speechless with fear; never before had they seen a woman killed so brutally. And for a long time they stood there in silence, looking at her where she lay with wide-open eyes and blood-stained mouth, and at him who was standing beside her, standing alone, apart from everyone else, very proud—he even held his head high as if he were calling down punishment upon it. When at last people recovered from their surprise, they seized him and bound him and left him there, finding that to kill him now would be too simple and would give them little satisfaction."

The night deepened and darkened and became filled with odd little sounds. The marmots peeped mournfully in the steppe, the grasshoppers whirred among the vines, the leaves sighed and whispered to one another,

the disc of the moon, which had been blood-red, paled as it withdrew from the earth and poured its blue light down on the steppe more lavishly than ever.

"And then the elders gathered to decide on a punishment equal to such a crime. At first they thought of having horses tear him to pieces, but this seemed too mild; they thought of having each of them send an arrow into his body, but this, too, was rejected; it was suggested that they burn him alive, but the smoke of the fire would hide his sufferings from them; many suggestions were made, but not one of them satisfied everyone. And all the while his mother knelt silently before them, finding neither words nor tears to move them to pity. For a long time they spoke together, and at last one of their wise men said, after due consideration:

"'Let us ask him why he has done this.'

"And they asked him.

"'Unbind me,' he said. 'I shall not say a word so long as I am bound.'

"And when they had unbound him he said:

"'What would you have of me?'—and his tone was that of a master to his slaves.

"'You have heard,' said the wise man.

"'Why should I explain my actions to you?'

"'That we may understand them. Listen, proud one: it is certain that you are to die; then help us to understand why you have done such a thing. We shall go on living, and it is important that we add to our store of knowledge.'

"'Very well, I shall tell you, although perhaps I myself do not wholly understand why I did it. It seems to me that I killed her because she repulsed me. And I had need of her.'

"'But she was not yours,' they said to him.

"'And do you make use of only those things which are yours? I see that each man has nothing but arms and legs and a tongue to speak with. And yet he owns cattle and women and land and many other things.'

"To this they replied that a man must pay for whatever he takes possession of—pay with his mind or his strength or even his life.

"He said that he had no wish to pay.

"When they had spoken to him for some time they saw that he considered himself above everyone else, that indeed he had no thought for anyone but himself. And they were horrified when they realized that he had isolated himself from the whole world. He had neither tribe nor mother nor cattle nor wife; nor did he wish to have any of these things.

"And, seeing this, they again discussed what might be a fitting punishment for him. But they had not spoken long before that same wise man, who until this moment had taken no part in the discussion, said:

"'Wait. A punishment has been found, and a dreadful one it is. In a thousand years you could not think of anything to equal it. The punishment lies in himself. Unbind him and let him go free. That will be his punishment.'

"And then a wonderful thing happened. A bolt of thunder struck out of a cloudless sky. In this way the heavenly powers confirmed the decision of the wise man. Everyone accepted it, and, having done so, they went away. And the youth, who was henceforth named Larra, meaning the despised and rejected—

the youth laughed at the people who had rejected him; laughed loudly on finding himself alone and as free as his father had been. But his father had not been a man, whereas he was. Yet he began to live as free as a bird. He stole cattle and maidens and anything else he wished from the tribesmen. They shot arrows at him, but they could not pierce his body, protected as it was by the invisible armour of the highest punishment. He was adroit, rapacious, strong and cruel, and never did he meet people face to face. He only saw them from a distance. Thus for a long time did he hover alone at the edge of human communities—for a long, long time. And then one day he crept close to a settlement, and when the people rushed out to attack him, he remained where he was and made not the slightest effort to defend himself. Then one of the men guessed his intention and cried out:

"'Do not touch him! He is seeking death!'

"And the people stayed their hands, not wishing to kill him and thereby bring relief to one who had wronged them so. They stayed their hands and laughed at him. And he shuddered at the sound of their laughter, and he

clutched at his breast, as if searching for something there. And suddenly he hurled himself at the people and threw stones at them. But they dodged his stones and did not throw a single one in return, and when at last, exhausted, he let out a cry of despair and threw himself down on the ground, they withdrew and stood watching him. They saw him struggle to his feet and pick up a knife someone had dropped in the scuffle and strike himself in the breast with it. But the knife broke in two as if it had struck upon stone. And again he threw himself down on the ground and beat his head against it, but the earth, too, withdrew from him, leaving a hollow where his head struck it.

"'He is unable to die!' cried the people in joy.

"And they went away and left him. He lay on his back gazing up into the sky, and he saw the black dots of mighty eagles soaring far, far away. And there was enough misery in his eyes to sadden the whole world. From that time to this he has been alone, at large, waiting for death. He does nothing but wander over the earth. You yourself have seen

how like a shadow he has become, and like a shadow he will remain till the end of time. He understands nothing, neither human speech nor actions; he just goes on and on, for ever in search of something. He cannot be said to live, and yet he is unable to die. And there is no place for him among men. Just see what a man's pride can bring him to!"

The old woman heaved a sigh, and once or twice she gave an odd shake of her head, which had fallen on her breast.

I looked at her. Sleep, it seemed, was overpowering her, and for some reason I felt sorry for her. She had ended her story in an exalted, admonishing tone, and yet I had detected a note of fear and servility in it.

The people down by the sea were singing, and singing in an unusual way. The tune was begun by a contralto, who sang only two or three notes before a second voice took it up from the beginning while the first carried it forward. A third, fourth and fifth voice joined in in the same way, and suddenly this same tune was begun by a chorus of men's voices.

Each of the women's voices was heard separately, and they were like streams of different colours tumbling down over rocks, leaping and sparkling as they rushed to join the rising swell of men's voices, were drowned in it, darted up out of it, drowned it out in their turn, and again, one by one, separated themselves from the heavier stream and soared, clear and strong, into the heights.

The sound of the surf could not be heard for the singing.

II

"Have you ever heard such singing before?" asked Izergil, raising her head to give me a toothless smile.

"No, I have not. Not anywhere."

"And you never will. We love to sing. Only a handsome race can sing well—a handsome race that is filled with love of life. We are such a race. Look, think you those people who are singing are not weary from the day's labour? They laboured from sunrise to sunset, but now that the moon has risen they are singing. People with no interest in life would have

gone to bed; but those who find life sweet are singing."

"But their health—" I began.

"One always has enough health to last a lifetime. Health! If you had money, would you not spend it? Health is gold no less than money. Do you know how my youth was spent? I wove rugs from dawn till dusk, scarcely unbending my back. I, who was as full of life as a ray of sunlight, had to sit as motionless as a stone. Sometimes my very bones ached from sitting so long. But when evening came I ran off to embrace the man I loved. For the three months that my love lasted I ran to him and spent all my nights with him. Yet see to what a great old age I have lived! The blood in my veins was sufficient, it seems. How often I fell in love! How many kisses I gave and took!"

I looked into her face. Her black eyes were still dull; not even her memories could restore their shine. The moon poured light on her dry, cracked lips, on her sharp chin tufted with grey hair, and on her wrinkled nose that was curved like the beak of an owl. There were dark hollows where her cheeks had

been, and in one of them lay a strand of grey hair that had escaped from under the red rag she had twisted round her head. A web of wrinkles covered her face, neck, and hands, and at every movement she made I expected this parchment-like skin to split and peel off, leaving a bare skeleton with dull black eyes sitting beside me.

Once more she began to talk in her cracked voice:

"I lived with my mother near Falmi, on the banks of the Birlat River, and I was fifteen years old when he came to our farm. He was tall and dark and graceful and very gay. He stopped his boat under our window and called out in a ringing voice: 'Hullo! Can I get some wine and something to eat here?' I looked out of the window, and through the branches of the ash-tree I saw the river all blue in the moonlight, and him standing there in a white blouse tied with a wide sash, one foot in the boat, the other on the bank. And he was rocking the boat and singing, and when he caught sight of me he said: 'Just see what a fair maid lives here, and I knew nothing of it!'—as if he knew all the other fair maids

in the world. I gave him some wine and some pork, and four days later I gave myself to him. Every night he and I went boating together. He would come and whistle softly, like a marmot, and I would jump out of the window like a fish on to the river-bank. And off we would go. He was a fisherman from the Prut, and when my mother found out about us and beat me, he urged me to run away to Dobruja with him and even further—to the tributaries of the Danube. But I had grown tired of him by then—he never did anything but sing and make love. I found it boring. And just at that time a band of Hutsuls came roaming through these parts and they found sweethearts for themselves here. Those maids had a merry time of it! Sometimes one of the lovers would disappear, and his sweetheart would pine away, sure that he had been put in prison or killed in a fight, and then, lo and behold! he would drop out of a clear sky, alone or with two or three comrades, bringing rich gifts (they came by their riches easily). And he would feast with her, and boast of her to his comrades. And this would give her pleasure. Once I asked a girl who had such

a lover to introduce me to the Hutsuls. Yet see, what was that girl's name? I have forgotten. My memory has begun to fail me. But it happened so long ago, anyone would forget. Through this girl I met a young Hutsul. He was handsome. A red-head. Red hair and red whiskers. Flaming red. At times he was moody, at others tender, and again he would roar and fight like a wild beast. Once he struck me in the face. I sprang up on his chest like a cat and sank my teeth into his cheek. From then on he had a dimple in his cheek, and he liked me to kiss him on that dimple."

"But what happened to the fisherman?" I asked.

"The fisherman? He stayed on. He joined their band—the Hutsuls. At first he begged me to come back to him and threatened to throw me into the river if I did not, but he soon got over it. He joined their band and found himself another sweetheart. They were both hanged together—the fisherman and my Hutsulian lover. I went to see them hanged. In Dobruja. The fisherman was deathly pale and wept when he went to his death, but the Hutsul smoked his pipe. He walked

straight ahead, smoking his pipe, his hands in his pockets, one of his moustaches sweeping his shoulder, the other his chest. When he caught sight of me, he took the pipe out of his mouth and cried out: 'Farewell!' I wept for him a whole year. They had been caught just when they were ready to go back to their native mountains. They were holding a farewell party at the house of a certain Rumanian when they were captured. Just the two of them. Several others were killed on the spot and the rest escaped. But the Rumanian was made to pay for what he had done. His farm and his mill and his barns of grain were burnt to the ground. He was turned into a beggar."

"Did you do it?" I hazarded a guess.

"The Hutsuls had many friends—I was not the only one. Whoever was their best friend did this in their memory."

The singing on the sea-shore had ceased by this time, and no other sound but the murmur of the waves accompanied the old woman's tale. Their murmur, restless and brooding, was fitting accompaniment to this tale of a restless life. Milder grew the night, deeper the blue of the moonshine, and softer the

indefinable sounds of night's invisible denizens whose clamour was drowned out by the increasing roar of the sea as the wind rose.

"And then there was a Turk I fell in love with. I was one of his harem in Scutari. For a whole week I lived there without minding it, but then I found the life tiresome. Nothing but women everywhere. He had eight of them. All day long they ate and slept and chattered nonsense. Or they quarrelled, and then they were like a set of cackling hens. The Turk was not a young man. His hair was almost white, and he was very rich and important. He spoke like an emperor. His eyes were black and straight—I mean they looked straight into your soul. And he was always praying. I first saw him in Bucharest. He was strutting about the bazaar like a king, looking very important. I smiled at him. That same evening I was seized in the street and brought to him. He traded in sandal and palm wood and had come to Bucharest to make purchases of some sort.

"'Will you go away with me?' he asked.

"'I will indeed,' I said.

"'Very well,' he said.

"And I went away with him. He was very rich. He had a son, a slim dark-haired youth of sixteen. It was with him I ran away from the Turk—ran away to Bulgaria, to Lom-Palanka. There a Bulgarian woman knifed me in the chest because of her husband or lover, I have forgotten which.

"For a long time after that I lay ill in a nunnery. A Polish girl, a nun, took care of me, and her brother, a monk from a monastery near Artzer-Palanka, used to come to see her. He kept wriggling round me like a worm, and when I got well I went off with him to Poland."

"But wait: what happened to the Turkish boy?"

"Oh, him? He died. He pined away with homesickness, or perhaps it was love. He began to wither like a sapling that has too much sun. Just withered away. I remember him lying there blue and transparent as ice, yet consumed by the flames of love. He kept asking me to bend over and kiss him. I loved him dearly and kissed him a lot. Little by little he became so weak he could hardly move. He would just lie there and beg me,

as if he were begging alms, to lie down beside him and warm his poor body. And I did. The minute I lay down beside him he would be all aflame. One day I woke up to find him stone-cold. He was dead. I wept over him. Who can tell? Perhaps it was I who had killed him. I was twice his age and very strong and vigorous, but he?—he was just a child."

She sighed and crossed herself—I had not seen her do that before. Three times she made the sign of the cross, muttering something between her dry lips.

"So you went off to Poland—" I prompted.

"I did, with that little Pole. He was beastly and absurd. When he wanted a woman, he would rub up against me like a tom-cat, the honey oozing between his lips; when his desire was satisfied he would lash me with his tongue as with a knout. One day when we were walking along the bank of a river, he said something proud and insulting. Oh, I was angry! I seethed like boiling pitch. I picked him up like a baby—he was very small—and squeezed him until he went black in the face. Then I swung out and hurled him over the bank into the river. He gave a shout, and it

sounded very funny. From the top of the bank I watched him struggling in the water, and then I went away and I have never seen him since. I was lucky in that respect: I never met my lovers after I had left them. It would be bad to meet them—like meeting the dead."

The old woman grew silent. In my mind's eye I saw the people her tale had conjured up. I saw her Hutsulian lover with the flaming-red hair and moustache calmly smoking his pipe as he went to his death. His eyes, it seemed to me, were a cold blue, and their glance was firm and intense. Beside him walked the dark-whiskered fisherman from the Prut. Loath to die, he was weeping, and his once merry eyes stared dully out of a face that had grown white in the anticipation of death, while his tear-drenched moustaches drooped mournfully at the corners of his twisted mouth. I saw the important old Turk who was no doubt a fatalist and a despot, and beside him his son, a pale delicate flower of the Orient, poisoned by kisses. And the conceited Pole, polite and cruel, eloquent and cold. And all of them now were but wan shades, and she

whom they had kissed so ardently was sitting beside me, still alive but shrivelled with age—bloodless, fleshless, with a heart bereft of all desire and eyes bereft of their shine —almost as much of a shade as they themselves.

She continued:

"I found it hard to live in Poland. The people there are false and cold-blooded. And I could not speak their snake-like tongue that does nothing but hiss. Why do they hiss? God gave them a snake-like tongue because they are so false. And so I set off, I knew not for where, and saw the Poles getting ready to rise up against you Russians. I came to the town of Bochnia. There a certain Jew bought me, not for himself, but to trade with my body. I agreed to this. One has to know how to do something if he is to earn a living; I did not know how to do anything, and I paid for it with my body. But I resolved that if I could get enough money to take me back to my native town on the Birlat, I would break my bonds, however fast they were. I could not complain of my life there. Rich gentlemen came and feasted with me. That cost them big sums.

They fought with each other over me and were brought to ruin. One of them tried for a long time to win my heart, and at last this is what he did: he came with his servant, who was carrying a big sack, and he emptied the sack over my head. Gold coins came showering down over me and it cheered my heart to hear their ring as they struck the floor. And yet I turned the man out. He had a fat greasy face and his belly was as puffy as a pillow. He looked like a stuffed pig. Yes, I turned him out, even though he told me he had sold all his land and his house and his horses to bring me that gold. But by that time I was in love with a worthy gentleman with a scarred face. His face was criss-crossed with scars left by Turkish sabres. He had just come back from helping the Greeks fight the Turks. There was a man for you! What were the Greeks to him, a Pole? Yet he went and helped them fight their enemy. The Turks marred him cruelly—under their blows he lost an eye and two fingers of the left hand. What were the Greeks to him, a Pole? Yet he fought for them, and he did this because he yearned to do brave deeds, and when a man

yearns to do brave deeds, he will always find an opportunity. Life is full of such opportunities, and if a man does not find them, it is because he is lazy or cowardly or does not understand life, for if he understands, he is sure to want to leave some memory of himself behind him. And if everyone wished to do this, life would not gobble people up without leaving a trace of them. A very fine man he was, he with the scarred face. He would have gone to the ends of the earth to do a good deed. I am afraid your people killed him in the uprising. Why did you go to fight the Magyars? But hush, say nothing."

And admonishing me to hold my tongue, old Izergil herself grew silent and thoughtful.

"I knew a certain Magyar. One day he left me—it was in the depths of winter—and in the spring, when the snow melted, they found him in a field with a bullet through his head. As many people die of love as of the plague—quite as many, if they were to be counted. But what was I talking about? Ah, yes, about Poland. It was there I played my last game. I happened to meet a gentleman who was very

handsome, devilishly handsome. But by that time I was old. Ugh, so old! I must have been forty by then—at least forty. And he was proud and had been pampered by the women. I came to love him dearly. He thought I would be his for the asking, but I did not give myself up so easily. Never had I been the slave of anyone, and by that time I had broken off with the Jew, which cost me a pretty penny, I can tell you. I was living in Krakow in fine style, with horses and gold and servants and everything else I wanted. He came to see me, the proud demon, and expected me to throw myself into his arms. A pitched battle took place between us. I grew haggard under the strain, for it lasted a long time, but at last I won. He fell on his knees before me. But no sooner had he got me than he cast me off. Then I knew I had grown old, and a bitter realization it was. Very bitter. I loved him, the fiend, and he would laugh in my face when he met me. He was a beast. And he would speak mockingly of me to others, and I knew it. Oh, how I suffered! But there he was, always near me, and I doted on him in spite of everything. And then one day he went away

to fight the Russians. I could not bear it. I tried to take myself in hand, but I could not master my feelings. I decided to go to him. He was stationed in a wood near Warsaw.

"But when I got there I found out that your soldiers had beaten them and he had been taken prisoner and was being held in a village not far away.

"'In other words, I shall never see him again!' I thought to myself. And I wanted desperately to see him. So I thought of a way to do so. I dressed myself as a beggar-woman, pretended to be lame, covered my face, and set out for the village where he was imprisoned. I found it full of soldiers and Cossacks; it cost me dear to stay there. When I found out where the Poles were, I realized it would be very hard to reach them. But reach them I must. And so one night I set out. As I was crawling between the beds of a vegetable garden I saw a sentry standing in front of me. I could hear the Poles singing and talking in loud voices. They were singing a song to the Virgin, and my Arkadek was singing with them. And I remembered with bitterness that

once men had crawled after me, and now here was I crawling like a worm after a man, perhaps crawling to my death. The sentry had pricked up his ears and was leaning forward. What was I to do? I stood up and went towards him. I did not have a knife or any other weapon with me—nothing but my hands and my tongue. I was sorry I had not taken a knife with me. The sentry levelled his bayonet at my throat, and I whispered: 'Wait! Listen to what I have to say and spare my life if you have a heart in your breast. I have nothing to offer you, but I beg your mercy.' He lowered his gun and whispered: 'Go away, old woman. Go away. What brings you here?' And I said that my son was imprisoned there. 'My son, soldier; does that mean nothing to you? You, too, are somebody's son. Then look at me and understand that I have a son like you, and that he is imprisoned here. Let me have one look at him. Perhaps he must die soon, and perhaps you, too, will be killed on the morrow. Will your mother not shed tears over you? And will it not be hard for you to die without a last look at her, your mother? It will be just as hard for any son.

Take pity on yourself, and on him, and on me, his mother!'

"How long I stood there trying to persuade him! The rain poured down, drenching us. The wind blew and wailed, buffeting me now in the back, now in the chest. And I stood swaying in front of that stony-hearted soldier. He kept saying 'no,' and every time I heard that unfeeling word, the desire to see Arkadek flared up hotter within me. As I talked I measured him with my eye—he was small and thin and had a cough. At last I threw myself on the ground in front of him, and, still pleading with him, I seized him round the knees and threw him on the ground. He fell in the mud. Quickly I turned him face down and pressed his head into a puddle to keep him from crying out. He did not cry out, but he struggled to throw me off his back. I took his head in both hands and pushed it deeper into the puddle. He was suffocated. Then I rushed over to the barn where the Poles were singing. 'Arkadek!' I whispered through a chink in the wall. They are sly fellows, those Poles, and so they did not stop singing on hearing me. But suddenly I saw his eyes

opposite mine. 'Can you get out of here?' I asked. 'Yes, under the wall,' he said. 'Then come quickly.' And so four of them crawled out of the barn, my Arkadek among them. 'Where is the sentry?' asked Arkadek. 'There he lies.' Then they crept away as quietly as possible, bent almost double. The rain kept coming down and the wind wailed loudly. We reached the end of the village and walked on through the woods for a long time without saying a word. We walked quickly. Arkadek held my hand in his, and his hand was hot and trembling. Oh, how good it was to walk there beside him as long as he kept silent! They were my last moments—the last happy moments of an insatiable life! But at last we came to a meadow, and there we stopped. All four of them thanked me for what I had done. They talked on and on—I thought they would never stop—and as I listened to them I kept feasting my eyes on Arkadek. How would he treat me now? And he put his arms about me and said something in a very pompous tone, I do not remember just what he said, but it was something to the effect that he would love me for having set him free, and

he knelt before me and said with a smile: 'My queen!' Ugh, what a false dog he was! I gave him a kick and would have slapped him in the face, but he sprang aside and leapt to his feet. And he stood before me, very grim and white. And the other three stood there looking sullen and saying not a word. I stared back at them. And I remember that a great weariness and indifference came over me. And I said to them: 'Go your way.' And they said to me, the dogs: 'And will you go back and tell them in what direction we have gone?' That is what beasts they were. But they went away. And I, too, went away. And on the next day your soldiers caught me, but they did not keep me long. Then I realized it was time for me to make a home for myself—the life of a cuckoo was a thing of the past. My body had grown heavy, my wings feeble, my feathers dull. I was old, I was old. And so I went to Galicia, and from there to Dobruja. For the last thirty years I have been living here. I had a husband, a Moldavian, but he died about a year ago. And I go on living. All alone. No, not alone—with them—" and the old woman pointed to the waves. They

were quiet now. Now and again there would be a faint suggestion of sound that died away as soon as it was born.

"They love me. I tell them many tales, and they like them. They are so young. I feel happy with them. I gaze at them and think: 'Time was when I was as they are. But in my day people had more strength and fire, and that made life gayer and more worth while. It did indeed.'"

She relapsed into silence again. I felt sad, sitting there beside her. Soon she dozed off, nodding her head and muttering something, perhaps a prayer, under her breath.

A thick dark cloud with the jagged outlines of a mountain range rose out of the sea and moved towards the steppe. A wisp was torn off its highest tip and went flying ahead, putting out the stars one by one. The sea began to murmur. A sound of kissing, of whispering, and of sighing came from the grape-arbour not far away. A dog howled out in the steppe. The air was filled with a strange odour that pricked the nostrils and made one's nerves tingle. The clouds cast dark clusters of shadow which crept over the earth, now fading,

now growing sharply distinct. Nothing remained of the moon but a vague opalescent glow that at times was completely blotted out by a bit of cloud. Tiny blue lights flickered far out in the steppe, which now had become dark and lowering, as if something fearful were lurking there. The lights flared up as if people were wandering over the steppe in search of something, lighting matches which the wind instantly blew out. They were very strange, these blue lights, and suggested the fantastic.

"Do you see any sparks out there?" asked Izergil.

"Those little blue lights?" said I, pointing out to the steppe.

"Blue? Yes, those little lights. So they are still to be seen! But not by my eyes. There are many things I do not see any more."

"Where do they come from?" I asked the old woman.

I had already heard one explanation of them, but I wanted to hear what old Izergil would say.

"They come from the flaming heart of Danko. Once upon a time there was a heart that broke into flame. And those sparks are what

is left of it. I shall tell you that tale. It, too, is old. Everything is old. See how many fine things there were in olden times! Today there is nothing—no men, no deeds, no tales—that can be compared with those of olden times. Why is that so? Come, tell me. Ah, you cannot. What do you know? What do any of you young people know? If you searched the past you would find the answer to all life's riddles. But you do not, and so you know nothing. Think you I do not see what is happening? I see only too well, even if my eyes have grown weak. And I see that instead of living, people spend their whole lives getting ready to live. And when they have robbed themselves by wasting all that time, they blame it on fate. What has fate to do with it? Each man is his own fate. There are all sorts of people in the world today, but I see no strong ones among them. What has become of them? And the handsome ones are growing fewer and fewer."

The old woman stopped to reflect on what had become of the strong and the handsome, and as she mused she gazed out into the dark steppe, as if searching for the answer there.

I waited in silence until she should begin her tale, fearing that any comment would distract her.

And presently she began.

III

"Long, long ago there lived some people in a place that was bounded on three sides by impenetrable forests and on the fourth by the steppe. They were a strong, brave, and cheerful people, but evil times came upon them. Other tribes put in an appearance and drove them into the depths of the forest. The forest was dark and swampy, for it was very ancient, and the boughs of the trees were so closely interwoven that they shut out the view of the sky, and the sun's rays had all they could do to pierce the thick foliage and reach the waters of the swamp. And wherever they reached those waters, poisonous vapours arose, and the people began to take sick and die. Then the women and children of that tribe began to weep, and the men brooded on what had happened and grew despondent. There was nothing for it but to get out of the

forest, but there were only two means of getting out: one of them was to go back over the road they had come, but at the end of this road strong and vicious foes awaited them; the other was to push forward through the forest, but here they would come up against the giant trees whose mighty branches were closely entwined and whose gnarled roots were sunk deep into the mire of the bogs. These stone-like trees stood silent and motionless in the grey gloom of daylight, and they seemed to close in upon the people at nightfall when the fires were lit. And always, day and night, this tribe, born to the freedom of the steppe, was walled in by shadows that seemed waiting to crush them. Most fearful of all was the wind that went wailing through the tops of the trees, causing the whole forest to sing a grim dirge to the people imprisoned there. They were, as I have said, a brave people, and they would have fought to the death with those who had once defeated them, had they not feared being wiped out in the fight: they had their ideals to defend, and if they perished, their ideals would perish with them. And for that reason they sat pondering their fate

through the long nights, with the poisonous vapours rising all around them and the forest singing its mournful song. And as they sat there, the shadows of the fires leaped about them in a soundless dance, and it seemed as if it were not mere shadows that were dancing, but the evil spirits of forest and bog celebrating their triumph. And nothing, not even work or women, can exhaust a man as do despondent thoughts. The men grew weak from brooding. Fear was born in their hearts, binding their strong arms; terror gripped them as they listened to the women wailing over the bodies of those who had died of the poisonous vapours or lamenting over the fate of the living made helpless by fear. And cowardly words came to be spoken in the forest—at first softly and timidly, but louder and louder as time went on. And at last the people thought of going to the enemy and making him a gift of their freedom. So frightened were they by the thought of death that not one of them shrank from living the life of a slave. But at this moment Danko appeared and saved them from such a fate."

The old woman, it seems, had often recounted

this tale about the flaming heart of Danko. As she intoned it in her hoarse crackling voice, I seemed to hear the sounds of the forest, in whose depths these unfortunate exiles were poisoned to death.

"Danko was one of them, and he was young and handsome. Handsome people are always courageous. And he said to his comrades:

"'Stones are not to be removed by thinking. He who does naught will come to naught. Why should we exhaust our energies thinking and brooding? Arise, and let us go through the forest until we come out at the other end; after all, it must have an end—everything has an end. Come, let us set forth!'

"They looked at him and saw that he was the best man among them, for his eyes were aglow with life and strength.

"'Lead us,' they said.

"And he led them."

The old woman stopped talking and gazed out over the steppe, which was growing darker and darker. Sparks from the flaming heart of Danko flared up in the distance like ethereal blue flowers that bloomed but for a moment.

"And so he led them, Danko. And they fol-

lowed him willingly, for they believed in him. It was a difficult path. It was dark, and at every step the yawning bogs swallowed people up, and the trees were like a mighty wall barring the way. Their branches were closely interwoven, their roots were like snakes reaching out in every direction, and every step these people took cost them blood and sweat. For a long time they went on, and the further they went, the thicker grew the forest and the weaker grew their limbs. And then they began to murmur against Danko, saying that he was young and inexperienced and had no right to bring them here. But he kept walking at their head, his spirit undaunted, his mind unclouded.

"But one day a storm broke over the forest, and the trees whispered together menacingly. And instantly it became as dark as if here were gathered all the nights that had passed since the forest was born. And the little people walked on under the big trees amid the roar of the storm, and as they walked the giant trees creaked and sang a sinister song, and the lightning flashed above the tree-tops, throwing a cold blue light over the forest

for a brief instant, disappearing as quickly as it had appeared and striking terror into the hearts of the people. And in the cold flashes of the lightning the trees seemed to be live things that were stretching out long gnarled arms and weaving them into a net to catch these people who were trying to escape from darkness. And something cold and dark and fearful peered at them through the dark foliage. It was a difficult path, and the people who had set out on it grew exhausted and lost heart. But they were ashamed to admit their weakness, and so they poured out their anger and resentment on Danko, who was walking at their head. They began to accuse him of being incapable of leading them.

"They came to a halt, and, tired and angry, they began to upbraid him there in the quivering darkness, amid the triumphant roar of the storm.

"'You are a despicable and evil creature who has brought us to grief,' they said. 'You have exhausted us by leading us here, and for that you shall die.'

"'You said: "Lead us!" and I led you,' cried out Danko, turning to face them. 'I

have the courage to lead you, and that is why I undertook to do it. But you? What have you done to help yourselves? You have done nothing but follow me, without so much as husbanding your strength for the greater march. You merely followed me like a flock of sheep.'

"His words only infuriated them the more.

"'You shall die! You shall die!' they shrieked.

"The forest roared and echoed their cries, and the lightning tore the darkness to shreds. Danko gazed upon those for whose sake he had undertaken such great labour, and he saw that they were like wild beasts. Many people were pressing about him, but he could detect no signs of humanity in their faces and he knew that he could expect no mercy from them. Then resentment seethed in his breast, but it was quelled by compassion. He loved these people, and he feared that without him they would perish. And the flames of a great yearning to save them and lead them out on to an easy path leaped up in his heart, and these mighty flames were reflected in his eyes. And seeing this, the people thought he was

enraged; they thought that was why his eyes flashed so. And they instantly grew wary, like wolves, expecting him to throw himself against them, and they drew closer about him that they might seize him and kill him. He saw what they were thinking, but the flames in his heart only flared up the brighter, for their thoughts added the oil of sorrow to the flames of his yearning.

"And the forest went on singing its mournful song, and the thunder crashed, and the rain poured down.

"'What else can I do to save these people?' cried out Danko above the thunder.

"And suddenly he ripped open his breast and tore out his heart and held it high above his head.

"It shone like the sun, even brighter than the sun, and the raging forest was subdued and lighted up by this torch, the torch of a great love for mankind, and the darkness retreated before it and plunged, quivering, into a yawning bog in the depths of the forest. And in their astonishment the people were as if turned to stone.

"'Follow me!' cried Danko, and he rushed

forward, holding his flaming heart high above his head to light the way.

"And the people followed him as if under a spell. And once more the forest began to murmur and wave its tree-tops in wonder. But its murmur was drowned out by the sound of running feet. The people were running ahead boldly and swiftly, lured on by the wonderful vision of the flaming heart. And even now there were those who perished, but they perished without tears and complaints. And Danko went on ahead of them, his heart flaming brighter and brighter.

"And suddenly the forest in front of them parted; it parted to make way for them and then closed behind them, a mute and solid wall, and Danko and his followers plunged into a sea of sunlight and rain-washed air. The storm was now behind them over the forest, while here the sun shone, the steppe throbbed with life, the grass was hung with diamond rain-drops and the river was streaked with gold. It was evening, and the rays of the sunset painted the river as red as the blood which poured in a hot stream from the wound in Danko's breast.

"The brave Danko cast his eye over the endless steppe, cast a joyful eye over this land of freedom, and gave a proud laugh. And then he fell down and died.

"And his followers were so full of joy and hope that they did not notice he had died and that his brave heart was still flaming beside his dead body. But one timid creature noticed it and, fearing he knew not what, stamped on the flaming heart. And it sent up a shower of sparks and went out.

"And that is why blue sparks are always to be seen in the steppe before a thunder-storm."

As the old woman finished her beautiful tale, the steppe grew incredibly still, as if overawed by the strength of the brave Danko, who set fire to his own heart for the sake of his fellow-men and died without seeking the least reward for what he had done.

The old woman dozed off. And as I looked at her I wondered how many more tales and memories her mind contained. And I ruminated on the flaming heart of Danko and on the power of the human imagination, which has created so many beautiful and inspiring legends.

The wind blew the rags off the bony chest of old Izergil, who had fallen fast asleep by this time. I covered up her old body and lay down on the ground beside her. It was dark and still in the steppe. Clouds floated slowly . . . wearily . . . across the sky, and the sea murmured softly . . . mournfully. . . .

1894

CHELKASH

THE BLUE southern sky was so obscured by dust that it had a murky look. The hot sun stared down at the greenish sea as through a thin grey veil, and its rays found poor reflection in the water, churned up as it was by the strokes of oars, the propellers of steamers and the sharp keels of Turkish feluccas and other craft which ploughed the crowded harbour in all directions. The waves of the sea, crushed within their granite encasements by the enormous weights gliding over their surfaces, hurled themselves at the shore and the sides of the ships—hurled themselves growling and foaming, their flanks littered with all sorts of rubbish.

The clang of anchor chains, the clash of the buffers of goods cars, the metallic wail of sheets of iron being unloaded on to paving-stones, the dull thump of wood against wood, the clatter of carts, the whistle of steamships rising from a wail to a shriek, the shouts of stevedores, seamen and customs guards—all this merged to form the deafening music of the working day which surged rebelliously in the sky above the harbour, while from the earth below new waves of sound kept rising to meet it—now a rumble that shook the earth, now a crash that rent the sultry air.

The granite, the steel, the wood, the paving-stones, the ships and the people—everything was impregnated with the mighty sounds of this impassioned hymn to Mercury. But human voices could hardly be detected in the general chorus, so weak and even ridiculous were they. And the people themselves, they whose efforts had given birth to all this sound, were ridiculous and pitiable; their ragged dirty wiry bodies were bent double under the loads on their backs as they rushed hither and thither in the dust and the heat and the noise, and they were as nothing com-

pared with the steel leviathans, the mountains of merchandise, the clanging railway cars, and all the other things which they themselves had created. The things of their own creating had enslaved them and robbed them of personality.

The gigantic ships lying with steam up whistled and hissed and heaved great sighs, and every sound they uttered was filled with mocking contempt for the drab and dusty creatures crawling over their decks to load their deep holds with the products of the servile labour. It made one laugh till the tears ran to see these long files of stevedores carrying thousands of poods of grain on their backs to be deposited in the iron bellies of the ships so that they themselves might earn a few pounds of grain to fill their own bellies. A poem of bitter irony could be read in the contrast between these ragged sweating men, stupefied by the heat, the noise, and the exhausting labour, and the powerful machines these men had made and which stood radiating well-being in the sunlight—machines which, when all is said and done, had been set in motion not by steam, but by the blood and muscles of those who made them.

The noise was oppressive; the dust tickled the nose and got into the eyes; the heat scorched and enervated the body, and everything seemed tense, as if the end of endurance had been reached and catastrophe was imminent, a tremendous explosion that would clear the air so that men might breathe freely and easily. And then silence would descend on the world and there would be no more dust and turmoil to deafen and irritate people and drive them mad; and the air of the town, of the sea, and of the sky would be fresh and clear and beautiful. . . .

Twelve measured strokes of a bell were heard. When the last brassy vibrations had died away the savage music of labour was found to have subsided, and a minute later it turned into a mere rumble of discontent. Now the voices of the people and the plash of the sea were more audible. It was the dinner hour.

I

When the stevedores stopped work and scattered over the docks in noisy groups to buy victuals from the vendors and find shady

corners where they could squat on the pavement to take their meal, Grishka Chelkash put in an appearance. He was well known to all the dockers, a confirmed drunkard, a bold and clever thief. He was barefooted and bareheaded, had on a pair of threadbare corduroy trousers and a filthy cotton shirt with a torn collar that exposed a bony chest covered by brown skin. The matted state of his iron-grey hair and the crumpled look of his lean and hawk-like face indicated that he had just waked up. A straw had become caught in his moustache, another in the stubble of his left cheek, while behind his ear he had stuck a sprig of linden. Long and lanky and a bit stooped, he sauntered slowly down the cobbled street, sniffing the air with his hooked nose and casting a glittering grey eye about him as he searched for someone among the dockers. His long dark moustache kept twitching like a cat's; he held his hands behind his back and kept rubbing them together and twisting his crooked grasping fingers. Even here, among hundreds of other roughs, he instantly attracted attention because of the resemblance to a steppe-hawk conveyed by

his predatory leanness and aimful walk, which, like the flight of the bird of prey he resembled, concealed a tense alertness under an appearance of poised tranquillity.

As he came up to a group of stevedores sitting in the shadow cast by a pile of coal baskets, a stocky young chap, with a blotched and vapid face and with scratches on his neck suggesting a recent fight, got up to meet him. He fell into step beside Chelkash and said under his breath:

"The seamen have discovered two bales of cloth missing. They're searching."

"So what?" Chelkash asked, calmly running his eyes over him.

"What d'ye mean 'so what'? They're searching, I tell you."

"And you thought I might join in the search?"

"Go to hell!"

The chap turned back.

"Wait! Who gave you those beauty-marks? A pity to mess up your shop front like that! Seen Mishka?"

"Not for a long time," called back the chap as he joined his comrades.

Everybody who met Chelkash greeted him as an old acquaintance, but he, usually so cheery and biting, must have been out of sorts, for his replies were all very terse.

From behind a pile of merchandise suddenly appeared a customs guard—dark-green, dusty, aggressively erect. He planted himself in front of Chelkash in a challenging pose, his left hand on the hilt of his dirk, his right reaching out for Chelkash's collar.

"Halt! Where you bound?"

Chelkash retreated a step, lifted his eyes to the guard's red face and gave a cool smile.

The face, wily but good-natured, tried to assume a dread aspect: the cheeks puffed out and turned purple, the brows drew together, the eyes rolled, and the effect on the whole was extremely comical.

"I told you once to keep away from these docks if you didn't want me to smash your ribs in, and here you are again!" he roared.

"Howdy, Semyonich! Haven't seen you for a long time," said the imperturbable Chelkash, holding out his hand.

"I wouldn't cry if I didn't see you for another fifty years. Move on, move on."

But he shook the extended hand.

"Here's what I wanted to ask," went on Chelkash, holding the guard's hand in steel fingers and shaking it in an intimate sort of way. "Seen Mishka anywhere?"

"What Mishka? I don't know any Mishka. Move on, man, or the packhouse guard may see you and then—"

"The red-headed chap I worked with on the *Kostroma* last time," persisted Chelkash.

"That you *thieved* with, you mean. They've put him in hospital, that Mishka of yours—got his leg crushed by some iron. Get out of here, I tell you, get out before I throw you out by the scruff of the neck."

"Listen to that, now! And you said you didn't know no Mishka. What makes you so nasty, Semyonich?"

"None of your talk! Get out!"

The guard was getting angry; he glanced about him and tried to free his hand, but Chelkash held on to it as he looked at him calmly from under bushy eyebrows and went on talking:

"What's the rush? Don't you want to have a nice little chat with me? How you getting

on? How's the wife and kiddies? Well?" His eyes twinkled and his teeth flashed in a mocking grin as he added: "Been wanting to drop in to see you for ever so long, but just can't seem to manage it. It's the drink—"

"Drop it, I tell you! None of your joking, you lanky lubber. I mean what I say. But maybe you're turning to house-breaking, or robbing people in the street?"

"Why should I? There's enough here to keep you and me busy a lifetime. Honest there is, Semyonich. But I hear you've snitched another two bales of cloth. Watch out, or you'll find yourself in trouble yet!"

Semyonich trembled with indignation and the saliva flew as he tried to give voice to it. Chelkash let go of his hand and calmly strode off on his long legs to the dock gates. The guard followed at his heels, cursing him roundly.

Chelkash was in better spirits now; he whistled a tune through his teeth, thrust his hands into his pockets, and retarded his steps, tossing off well-aimed quips to right and left. He was paid in his own coin.

"Just see what good care of you the bosses

are taking, Grishka!" called out a stevedore who was stretched out on the ground with his comrades, taking a rest after their meal.

"Semyonich's seeing I don't step on any nails in my bare feet," replied Chelkash.

They got to the gates. Two soldiers ran their hands down Chelkash's clothes and pushed him out into the street.

He crossed the road and sat down on the curbstone opposite a pub. A line of loaded carts came thundering out of the dock gates, while a line of empty ones moved in the other direction, their drivers bouncing in their seats. The docks belched forth a roar of sound and clouds of dust that stuck to the skin.

Chelkash was in his element amid this mad welter. He was anticipating a good haul that night, a haul that would cost him little effort but require a great deal of skill. He did not doubt but that his skill was sufficient, and he screwed up his eyes with pleasure as he reflected on how he would spend all his banknotes the next morning. He thought of his pal Mishka. He needed him badly, and here he had gone and broken his leg. Chelkash cursed under his breath, for he feared he

could not handle the job alone. What would the weather be like? He glanced up at the sky, then down the street.

Sitting on the pavement, his back against a hitching post some half a dozen paces away, was a young lad in a blue homespun shirt and trousers, with bast sandals on his feet and a torn brown cap on his head. Beside him lay a small knapsack and a haftless scythe wrapped in straw and neatly tied with string. The lad was sturdy, broad-shouldered, fair-haired, his face was tanned by wind and sun, and he had large blue eyes that stared amiably at Chelkash.

Chelkash bared his teeth, stuck out his tongue, made a frightful face and stared back with popping eyes.

The boy blinked in astonishment at first, then he burst out laughing, calling out between spasms: "Crazy as a loon!" Without getting up, he hitched along the curbstone to where Chelkash was sitting, dragging his knapsack through the dust and allowing the tip of his scythe to clank over the cobbles.

"Been on the booze, eh?" he said to Chelkash, giving a tug at his trousers.

"You're right, baby-face, you're right," confessed Chelkash with a smile. He was instantly drawn to this wholesome good-natured chap with eyes as clear as a baby's. "Been haymaking?"

"Yes. Made hay, but no money. Times are bad. You never saw so many people! They all come drifting down from the famine districts. No point in working for such pay. Sixty kopeks in the Kuban, think of that! They say they used to pay three or four rubles, or even five."

"Used to! They used to pay three rubles just to get a look at a Russian! That's how I earned a living ten years ago. I'd come to a Cossack village: 'Here I am, folks, an honest-to-God Russian!' They'd all crowd round, look me over, poke me, pinch me, oh-and-ah and pay me three rubles. Give me food and drink besides and invite me to stay as long as I liked."

At first the boy opened wide his mouth, an expression of wondering admiration on his round face, but as he realized Chelkash was fabricating, he snapped his mouth shut, then burst out laughing again. Chelkash kept a

straight face, hiding his smile in his moustache.

"A queer bird you are, talking talk as if it was God's truth and me swallowing it. But honest to goodness, it used to be—"

"Isn't that just what I was saying? It used to be—"

"Oh, come!" said the boy with a wave of his hand. "What are you, a cobbler, or a tailor, or what?"

"Me?" Chelkash mused awhile and then said: "I'm a fisherman."

"A fisherman? Think of that! So you catch fish, do you?"

"Why fish? The fishermen here don't only catch fish. Mostly dead bodies, old anchors, sunken boats. There's special fish-hooks for such things."

"Lying again. Maybe you're one of those fishermen who sing:

We cast our nets
Upon the shores,
In market stalls, in open doors.

"Ever met fishermen like that?" asked Chelkash, looking hard at the boy and grinning.

"No, but I've heard about them."

"Like the idea?"

"Of people like that? Why not? At least they're free; they can do what they please."

"What's freedom to you? Do you hanker after freedom?"

"Of course. What could be better than to be your own boss, go where you like and do what you like? Only you've got to keep straight and see that no millstones get hung round your neck. Outside of that, go ahead and have a good time without a thought for anything save God and your conscience."

Chelkash spat contemptuously and turned away.

"Here's what I'm up against," went on the boy. "My father died without leaving anything much, my mother's old, the land's sucked dry. What am I supposed to do? I've got to go on living, but how? God knows. I have a chance to marry into a good family. I wouldn't mind if they'd give the daughter her portion. But they won't. Her old man won't give her an inch of land. So I'd have to work for him, and for a long time. For years. There you are. If only I could lay hands

on, say, a hundred and fifty rubles I'd be able to stand up to her father and say: 'Do you want me to marry your Marfa? You don't? Just as you say; she's not the only girl in the village, thank God.' I'd be independent, see? and could do what I liked." The boy heaved a sigh. "But it looks as if there was nothing for it but to be his son-in-law. I thought I'd bring back a couple of hundred rubles from the Kuban. That would be the thing! Then I'd be a gentleman! But I didn't earn a damn thing. Nothing for it but to be a farm-hand. I'll never have a farm of my own. So there you are."

The boy squirmed and his face fell at the prospect of being this man's son-in-law.

"Where you bound now?" asked Chelkash.

"Home. Where else?"

"How do I know? Maybe you're bound for Turkey."

"Turkey?" marvelled the boy. "What honest Christian would ever go to Turkey? A fine thing to say!"

"You *are* a blockhead," murmured Chelkash, turning away again. Yet this wholesome village lad had stirred something in him; a vague

feeling of dissatisfaction was slowly taking form within him, and this kept him from concentrating his mind on the night's task.

The boy, offended by Chelkash's words, muttered to himself and threw sidelong glances at the older man. His cheeks were puffed up in a droll way, his lips were pouting and his narrowed eyes blinked rapidly. Evidently he had not expected his talk with this bewhiskered ruffian tramp to end so suddenly and so unsatisfactorily.

But the tramp paid no more attention to him. His mind was on something else as he sat there on the curbstone whistling to himself and beating time with a dirty toe.

The boy wanted to get even with him.

"Hey, you fisherman! Do you often go on a bout?" he began, but at that moment the fisherman turned to him impulsively and said:

"Look, baby-face, would you like to help me to do a job tonight? Make up your mind, quick!"

"What sort of job?" asked the boy dubiously.

"'What sort'! Whatever sort I give you. We're going fishing. You'll row."

"Oh, I wouldn't mind doing that, I'm not afraid of work. Only—what if you get me into trouble? You're a queer egg; there's no understanding you."

Chelkash had a sensation as of heart-burn.

"Don't go spouting on things you don't know anything about," he said with cold animosity. "I'll give you a good crack over the bean, and then you'll understand a thing or two."

He jumped up, his eyes flashing, his left hand pulling at his moustache, his right clenched in a hard and corded fist.

The boy was frightened. He glanced quickly about him and then he, too, jumped up, blinking nervously. The two of them stood there silently measuring each other with their eyes.

"Well?" said Chelkash harshly. He was seething inside, twitching all over from the insult taken from this puppy he had held in such contempt so far, but whom he now hated with all his soul because he had such clear blue eyes, such a healthy tanned face,

such short sturdy arms; because he had a native village and a house there, and an offer to be the son-in-law of a well-to-do muzhik; he hated him for the way he had lived in the past and would live in the future, but most of all he hated him because he, a mere child as compared with Chelkash, dared to hanker after a freedom he could neither appreciate nor have need of. It is always unpleasant to discover that a person you consider beneath you loves or hates the same things you do, thereby establishing a certain resemblance to yourself.

As the lad looked at Chelkash he recognized in him a master.

"I don't really—er—mind," he said. "After all, I'm looking for work. What difference does it make whether I work for you or somebody else? I just said that because—well, you don't look much like a workingman. You're so—er—down at heel. But that can happen to anybody, I know. God, haven't I seen drunks before? Plenty of them, some even worse than you."

"All right, all right. So you're willing?" said Chelkash in a milder tone.

"With pleasure. State your price."

"The price depends on the job. How much we catch. Maybe you'll get five rubles."

Now that the talk was of money, the peasant wanted to be exact and demanded the same exactness from the man who was hiring him. Once more he had his doubts and suspicions.

"That won't suit me, brother."

Chelkash played his part.

"Don't let's talk about it now. Come along to the tavern."

And they walked down the street side by side, Chelkash twirling his moustache with the air of a master; the lad fearful and distrusting, but willing to comply.

"What's your name?" asked Chelkash.

"Gavrilla," answered the lad.

On entering the dingy, smoke-blackened tavern, Chelkash went up to the bar and in the off-hand tone of a frequenter ordered a bottle of vodka, cabbage soup, roast beef and tea; he repeated the list and then said nonchalantly: "On tick," to which the barman replied by nodding silently. This instantly inspired Gavrilla with respect for his

employer, who, despite his disreputable appearance, was evidently well known and trusted.

"Now we'll have a bite and talk things over. Sit here and wait for me; I'll be right back."

And he went out. Gavrilla looked about him. The tavern was in a basement; it was dark and damp and filled with the stifling smell of vodka, tobacco smoke, pitch, and something else just as pungent. A drunken red-bearded sailor smeared all over with pitch and coal-dust was sprawling at a table opposite him. Between hiccups he gurgled a song made of snatches of words which were all sibilant one minute, all guttural the next. Evidently he was not a Russian.

Behind him were two Moldavian women. Swarthy, dark-haired, ragged, they too were wheezing out a drunken song.

Out of shadows loomed other figures, all of them noisy, restless, dishevelled, drunken. . . .

Gavrilla was gripped by fear. If only his boss would come back! The noises of the tavern merged in a single voice, and it was as

if some huge multiple-tongued beast were roaring as it vainly sought a means of escape from this stone pit. Gavrilla felt some intoxication seeping into his body, making his head swim and his eyes grow hazy as they roved the tavern with fearful curiosity.

At last Chelkash came back and the two men began to eat and drink and talk. Gavrilla was drunk after his third glass of vodka. He felt very gay and was anxious to say something nice to this prince of a chap who had treated him to such a fine meal. But somehow the words that surged in his throat would not come off his tongue, suddenly grown thick and unwieldy.

Chelkash looked at him with a condescending smile.

"Stewed? Ekh, you rag! On five swigs. How are you going to work tonight?"

"Ol' pal!" lisped Gavrilla. "Don't be 'fraid. I'll show you. Gimme a kiss, c'mon."

"That's all right. Here, take another guzzle."

Gavrilla went on drinking until he reached the point at which everything about him seemed to be moving up and down in rhyth-

mic waves. This was unpleasant and made him sick. His face wore an expression of foolish solemnity. Whenever he tried to say anything, his lips slapped together comically and garbled sounds came through them. Chelkash twisted his moustache and smiled glumly as he gazed at him abstractedly, his mind on something else.

Meanwhile the tavern was roaring as drunkenly as ever. The red-headed sailor had folded his arms on the table and fallen fast asleep.

"Time to go," said Chelkash, getting up.

Gavrilla tried to follow him but could not; he let out an oath and laughed idiotically, as drunks do.

"What a wash-out!" muttered Chelkash, sitting down again.

Gavrilla kept on laughing and looking at his boss with bleary eyes, while Chelkash turned a sharp and thoughtful eye on him. He saw before him a man whose fate he held in his wolfish paw. Chelkash sensed that he could do what he pleased with him. He could crush him in his hand like a playing-card, or he could help him get back to the

solid peasant way of life. Conscious of his power over him, he reflected that this lad would never have to drink the cup it had been the fate of him, Chelkash, to drink. He envied and pitied the boy; he despised him, and yet he was sorry to think that he might fall into other hands, no better than his own. In the end, Chelkash's various emotions combined to form a single one that was both fatherly and practical. He pitied the boy and he needed him. And so he took Gavrilla under the arms and lifted him up, giving him little pushes with his knee as he led him out into the tavern yard where he laid him down in the shade of a wood-pile, he himself sitting beside him and smoking his pipe. Gavrilla tossed about awhile, gave a few grunts and fell asleep.

II

"Ready?" whispered Chelkash to Gavrilla, who was fussing with the oars.

"In a minute. The rowlock's loose. Can I give it a bang with the oar?"

"No! Not a sound! Push it down with your hands; it'll slip into place."

Both of them were noiselessly busy with a boat tied to the stern of one of a whole fleet of barges loaded with oaken staves and of Turkish feluccas carrying palm and sandal wood and thick cyprus logs.

The night was dark, heavy banks of tattered clouds floated across the sky, the sea was calm and black and as heavy as oil. It gave off a moist saline odour and made tender little noises as it lapped at the shore and the sides of ships, causing Chelkash's boat to rock gently. At some distance from shore could be seen the dark outlines of ships against the sky, their masts tipped by varicoloured lights. The sea reflected these lights and was strewn with innumerable yellow spots that looked very beautiful quivering upon the background of black velvet. The sea was sleeping as soundly as a workman who has been worn out by the day's labour.

"Let's go," said Gavrilla, dipping an oar into the water.

"Let's." Chelkash pushed off hard with the steering oar, sending the boat into the lanes between the barges. It glided swiftly over the water, which gave off a blue phosphorescent

glow wherever the oars struck it and formed a glowing ribbon in the wake of the boat.

"How's your head? Ache?" asked Chelkash solicitously.

"Something fierce. And it's heavy as lead. Here, I'll wet it."

"What for? Wet your insides; that'll bring you round quicker," said Chelkash, holding out a bottle.

"Ah, God be thanked."

There was a gurgling sound.

"Hey! That's enough!" interrupted Chelkash.

Once more the boat darted forward, weaving its way among the other craft swiftly and soundlessly. Suddenly it was beyond them, and the sea—the mighty boundless sea—stretched far away to the dark-blue horizon, from which sprang billowing clouds: grey-and-mauve with fluffy yellow edges; greenish, the colour of sea water; leaden-hued, throwing dark and dreary shadows. Slowly moved the clouds across the sky, now overtaking each other, merging in colour and form, annihilating each other only to appear

again in new aspects, grimly magnificent. There was something fatal in the slow movement of these inanimate forms. It seemed as if there were endless numbers of them at the rim of the sea, and as if they would go on crawling across the sky for ever, impelled by a vicious desire to keep the sky from gazing down upon the slumbering sea with its millions of golden orbs, the many-hued stars, that hung there alive and pensively radiant, inspiring lofty aspirations in the hearts of men to whom their pure shine was a precious thing.

"Nice, the sea, isn't it?" asked Chelkash.

"I suppose so, but it makes me afraid," said Gavrilla as he pulled hard and evenly on the oars. The water let out a faint ring and splash as the oars struck it, and it still gave off that blue phosphorescent glow.

"Afraid! You *are* a boob," grunted Chelkash.

He, a thief, loved the sea. His nervous, restive nature, always thirsting for new impressions, never had enough of contemplating its dark expanses, so free, so powerful, so boundless. And he resented such a tepid response to his question about the beauty of

the thing he loved. As he sat there in the stern of the boat letting his steering oar cut through the water while he gazed calmly ahead, he was filled with the one desire to travel as long and as far as he could over that velvety surface.

He always had a warm expansive feeling when he was on the sea. It filled his whole being, purging it of the dross of daily life. He appreciated this and liked to see himself a better man here among the waves and in the open air, where thoughts about life lose their poignancy and life itself loses its value. At night the soft breathing of the slumbering sea is wafted gently over the waters, and this unencompassing sound fills the heart of man with peace, crams away its evil impulses, and gives birth to great dreams.

"Where's the fishing tackle?" asked Gavrilla suddenly, glancing anxiously about the boat.

Chelkash gave a start.

"The tackle? I've got it here in the stern."

He did not wish to lie to this green youth and he regretted having his thoughts and feelings dispelled in this abrupt way. It made

him angry. Again he had that burning sensation in his throat and chest and said to Gavrilla in a hard and impressive voice:

"Listen, sit where you are and mind your own business. I hired you to row, so you row; and if you start wagging your tongue it will go hard with you. Understand?"

The boat gave a little jerk and came to a halt, the oars dragging and stirring up the water. Gavrilla shifted uneasily on his seat.

"Row!"

A fierce oath shook the air. Gavrilla lifted the oars and the boat, as if frightened, leaped ahead in quick nervous spurts that made the water splash.

"Steady!"

Chelkash half rose without letting go of the steering oar and fastened cold eyes on Gavrilla's white face. He was like a cat about to spring as he stood there bent forward. The grinding of his teeth could be heard, as could the chattering of Gavrilla's teeth.

"Who's shouting there?" came a stern cry from out at sea.

"Row, you bastard! Row! Shhh! I'll kill you, damn your hide! Row, I tell you! One,

two! Just you dare to make a sound! I'll rip you to pieces!" hissed Chelkash.

"Holy Virgin, Mother of God!" murmured Gavrilla, trembling with fear and exertion.

The boat swung round and went back to the harbour where the ships' lanterns formed clusters of coloured lights and their masts stood out distinctly.

"Hi! Who's shouting?" came the cry again.

But it came from a distance now. Chelkash was reassured.

"It's you who's shouting!" he called back, then turned to Gavrilla who was still muttering a prayer.

"Luck's with you this time, lad. If those devils had chased us it would have been all over with you. I'd have fed you to the fishes first thing."

Seeing that Chelkash had calmed down and was in a good humour, the trembling Gavrilla pleaded with him:

"Let me go; for the love of Christ, let me go. Set me down somewheres. Oi, oi, oi, I've been trapped! For God's sake, let me go. What do you want of me? I can't do this. I've never been mixed up in such

business. It's the first time. God, I'm lost for sure. Why have you done this to me? It's a sin. You'll pay for it with your soul. Oh, what a business!"

"Business?" asked Chelkash sharply. "What business?"

He was amused by the boy's terror; he took pleasure in contemplating it and in thinking what a ferocious fellow he himself was.

"Bad business, brother. Let me go, for the love of God. What do you need me for? Come, be a good chap—"

"Hold your tongue! If I didn't need you I wouldn't have brought you, understand? So shut up!"

"Dear God," murmured Gavrilla.

"Stop blubbering," Chelkash cut him off sharply.

But Gavrilla could no longer control himself; he whimpered softly, coughed, sniffled, wriggled, but rowed with a strength born of despair. The boat flew ahead like an arrow. Once more they found themselves surrounded by the dark forms of ships. Their boat became lost among them as it turned and twisted through the narrow lanes of water.

"Listen, you! If you get asked any questions, keep your mouth shut if you value your life, understand?"

"God!" breathed Gavrilla, adding bitterly: "It must be my fate."

"Stop blubbering," whispered Chelkash again.

This whisper robbed Gavrilla of his mental power; he was benumbed by a chill premonition of disaster. Like one in a trance he dropped his oars into the water, threw himself backwards as he pulled, lifted them and dropped them again, his eyes fixed steadily on his bast sandals.

The sleepy plash of the waves was dreary and terrifying. But now they were in the docks. From the other side of a stone wall came the sound of human voices, of singing and whistling and a splashing of water.

"Stop," whispered Chelkash. "Put down your oars. Push with your hands against the wall. Shhh, damn you!"

Gavrilla guided the boat along the wall by holding on to the slippery masonry. The boat moved without a sound, the slime on the stones deadening the sound of its bumping.

"Stop. Give me the oars; give them to me, I say. Where's your passport? In your knapsack? Let's have it. Hurry up. That's to keep you from running away, pal. No danger of that now. You might have run away without the oars, but not without your passport. Wait here. And mind, if you blab, I'll find you even if it's at the bottom of the sea!"

And then, pulling himself up by his hands, Chelkash disappeared over the wall.

It happened so quickly that Gavrilla gave a little gasp. And then the heaviness in his heart and the fear inspired by that lean bewhiskered thief fell from him like a garment. Now he would run away! Drawing a free breath, he glanced round. To his left rose a black hull without a mast, a sort of gigantic coffin, empty and abandoned. Every time the waves struck it, it let out a hollow sound that might have been a groan. To the left was the slimy wall of the breakwater, a cold heavy serpent uncoiled upon the sea. Behind him loomed other dark forms, while ahead, in the opening between the wall and the coffin, he got a glimpse of the empty sea with black clouds banked above it. Ponderous,

enormous, they moved slowly across the sky, spreading horror in the darkness, threatening to crush human beings with their great weight. Everything was cold, black, sinister. Gavrilla was frightened. And his present fear was greater than that inspired by Chelkash. It clamped him tightly round the chest, squeezing all resistance out of him and pinning him to his seat.

Everything was quiet. Not a sound was to be heard but the sighing of the sea. The clouds moved as slowly and drearily as ever, and so many of them rose out of the sea that the sky was like a sea itself, an agitated sea turned upside down over this smooth, slumbering one. The clouds were like waves whose foamy crests were rushing down upon the earth, rushing back into the chasms out of which they had sprung, rushing upon the new-born billows which had not yet broken into the greenish foam of savage fury.

So oppressed was Gavrilla by the austere silence and beauty about him that he was anxious to have his master come back. What if he should not come? Time dragged slowly—slower than the movement of the clouds

across the sky. And the longer he waited, the more menacing grew the silence. But at last a splash, a rustle, and something like a whisper came from the other side of the breakwater. Gavrilla felt that he would die in another minute.

"Hullo! Sleeping? Here, catch this. Careful," came the muffled voice of Chelkash.

Something square and heavy was let down over the wall. Gavrilla put it in the boat. A similar bundle followed. Then the lanky form of Chelkash slid down, the oars appeared, Gavrilla's knapsack fell at his feet, and Chelkash, breathing hard, took his seat in the stern.

Gavrilla gave a diffident smile of joy.

"Tired?" he asked.

"Ra-ther! Well, lay on the oars. Pull with all your might. You've earned a neat little sum. Half the job's over; all you've got to do now is slip past those bastards and then—collect and go back to your Masha. I s'pose you've got a Mashka, haven't you?"

"N-no." Gavrilla was putting forth his best effort, his lungs working like bellows, his arms like steel springs. The water gurgled

under the boat and the blue ribbon in its wake was wider than before. Gavrilla became drenched in sweat but he did not let up on the oars. Twice that night he had a great fright; he did not wish to have a third one. The only thing he wanted was to get this accursed job over as quickly as possible, set foot on dry land and escape from that man while he was still alive and out of jail. He resolved not to talk to him, not to oppose him in any way, to do everything he ordered him to, and if he managed to get away safely, to say a prayer to St. Nicholas the Miracle-Worker on the very next day. An impassioned prayer was ready on his tongue, but he held it back, panting like a locomotive and glancing up at Chelkash from under drawn brows.

Chelkash, long and lean, was crouching like a bird about to take wing, his hawk-like eyes piercing the darkness ahead, his hooked nose sniffing the air, one hand clutching the steering oar, the other pulling at his moustache, which twitched as his thin lips spread in a smile. Chelkash was pleased with his haul, with himself, and with this

youth whom he had terrorized and converted into his slave. As he watched Gavrilla exerting himself, he felt sorry for him and thought he would offer him a word of encouragement.

"Ekh!" he said softly, with a little laugh, "got a good scare, did you?"

"Not so bad," grunted Gavrilla.

"You can take it easier now. The danger's over. There's just one place more we've got to slip past. Take a rest."

Gavrilla obediently stopped rowing, and dropped his oars into the water again.

"Row softly. Keep the water from talking. There's a gate we've got to get past. Shhh. The men here can't take a joke. Always ready with their guns. You'll have a hole in your head before you know what's struck you."

Now the boat was gliding through the water almost without sound. The only sign of its movement was the blue shine of the water dripping off the oars and the blue flare of the sea as the drops struck it. The night grew darker and stiller. The sky no longer resembled an agitated sea—the clouds had spread out to form a heavy blanket that hung low

and immobile over the water. The sea was even more calm and black, its warm saline odour was stronger than ever, and it no longer seemed so boundless.

"If only it would rain!" murmured Chelkash. "It would hide us like a curtain."

Great forms rose out of the water to right and left of the boat. They were barges—dark and dreary and motionless. On one of them a light could be seen moving: someone was walking about with a lantern in his hand. The sea made little pleading sounds as it patted the sides of the barges, and they gave chill and hollow answers, as if unwilling to grant the favours asked of them.

"A cordon!" said Chelkash in a scarcely audible voice.

Ever since he had told Gavrilla to row softly, the latter had again been gripped by a feeling of tense expectation. As he strained ahead into the darkness it seemed to him that he was growing—his bones and sinews ached as they stretched and his head ached, too, filled as it was with a single thought. The skin of his back quivered and he had a sensation of pins-and-needles in his feet.

His eyes felt as if they would burst from straining so hard into the darkness, out of which he expected someone to rise up any minute and shout at them: "Stop, thieves!"

Gavrilla shuddered on hearing Chelkash say "A cordon." A dreadful thought flashed through his mind and struck upon his taut nerves: he thought of calling out for help. He even opened his mouth, pressed his chest against the side of the boat and took a deep breath, but horror of what he was about to do struck him like a lash; he closed his eyes and fell off the seat.

From out of the black waters rose a flaming blue sword of light; rose and cleaved the darkness of night; cut through the clouds in the sky and came to rest on the bosom of the sea in a broad blue ribbon of light. There it lay, its rays picking the forms of ships, hitherto unseen, out of the darkness—black silent forms, shrouded in the gloom of night. It was as if these ships had lain for long at the bottom of the sea, to which they had been consigned by the forces of the storm, and now, at the will of this flaming sword born of the sea, they had been raised, that

they might gaze on the sky and on all things that exist above water. The rigging of their masts was like clinging seaweed that had been brought up from the bottom of the sea along with the gigantic black forms it enmeshed as in a net. Then once again this fearsome blue sword rose, flashing, off the bosom of the sea, and once again it cleaved the night and lay down again, this time in another spot. And again the forms of ships which had not been seen before were illuminated by its light.

Chelkash's boat stopped and rocked on the water as if deliberating what to do. Gavrilla was lying in the bottom of the boat, his hands over his face, while Chelkash poked him with his foot and whispered savagely:

"That's the customs cruiser, you fool! And that's its spotlight. Get up. They'll have it pointed at us in a minute. You'll be the ruin of me and yourself as well, you idiot. Get up!"

A particularly effective kick in the back brought Gavrilla to his feet. Still afraid to open his eyes, he sat down, felt for the oars, and began to row.

"Easy! Easy, damn you! God, what a fool I picked up! What you afraid of, snout-face? A lantern—that's all it is. Easy with those oars, God damn you! They're searching for smugglers. But they won't catch us. They're too far out. Oh, no, they won't catch us. Now we're—" Chelkash looked about triumphantly "—we're out of danger. Phew! Well, you're a lucky devil, even if you are a blockhead."

Gavrilla rowed on, saying nothing, breathing heavily, stealing sidelong glances at the flaming sword that kept rising and falling. Chelkash said it was only a lantern, but he could not believe it. There was something uncanny about this cold blue light cleaving the darkness, giving the sea a silver shimmer, and once more Gavrilla was gripped by fear. He rowed mechanically, all his muscles taut as in expectation of a blow from above, and there was nothing he wanted now; he was empty and inanimate. The excitement of that night had drained everything human out of him.

But Chelkash was jubilant. His nerves, used to strain, quickly relaxed. His mous-

tache twitched with gratification and his eyes sparkled. Never had he been in better humour; he whistled through his teeth, drew in deep breaths of the moist sea air, looked about him, smiled good-naturedly when his eyes came to rest on Gavrilla.

A wind sprang up, rousing the sea and covering it with little ripples. The clouds grew thinner and more transparent but the whole sky was still covered with them. The wind rushed lightly back and forth across the sea, but the clouds hung motionless, as if deeply engrossed in drab, uninteresting thoughts.

"Come, snap out of it, brother. You look as if you'd had all the spirit knocked out of you; nothing but a bag of bones left. As if it was the end of the world."

Gavrilla was glad to hear a human voice, even if it was Chelkash's.

"I'm all right," he murmured.

"You look it! Got no stuffings in you. Here, take the steering oar and let me row. You must be tired."

Gavrilla got up mechanically and changed places with him. In passing, Chelkash got

a look at the boy's white face and noticed that his knees were trembling so that they could hardly hold him. This made him more sorry than ever for him, and he gave him a pat on the shoulder.

"Come, chin up! You did a good job. I'll reward you well for it. What would you think if I handed you a twenty-five ruble note, eh?"

"I don't want anything. Nothing but to get on shore."

Chelkash gave a wave of his hand, spat, and began to row, swinging the oars far back with his long arms.

The sea was quite awake now. It amused itself by making little waves, ornamenting them with fringes of foam, and running them into each other so that they broke in showers of spray. The foam hissed and sighed as it dissolved, and the air was filled with musical sounds. The darkness seemed to have waked up, too.

"So now," said Chelkash, "you'll go back to your village, get married, start working the land, raise corn, your wife will bear children, there won't be enough to eat, and

all your life you'll work yourself to the bone. What fun is there in that?"

"Fun?" echoed Gavrilla faintly and with a little shudder.

Here and there the wind tore rifts in the clouds, revealing patches of blue sky set with one or two stars. The reflection of these stars danced on the water, now disappearing, now gleaming again.

"Bear more to the right," said Chelkash. "We're almost there. Hm, the job's over. A big job. Just think, five hundred rubles in a single night!"

"Five hundred?" repeated Gavrilla incredulously. Frightened by the words, he gave the bundles a little kick and said, "What's in them?"

"Things that are worth a lot of money. They'd bring in a thousand if I got the right price, but I can't be bothered. Slick, eh?"

"Good Lord!" said Gavrilla unbelievingly. "If only I had as much!" He sighed as he thought of his village, his wretched farm, his mother, and all those dear and distant things for whose sake he had set out in search of work; for whose sake he had undergone

the tortures of that night. He was caught up in a wave of memories—his little village on the side of a hill running down to the river, and the woods above the river with its birches, willows, rowans, and bird-cherry.

"How I need it!" he sighed mournfully.

"You don't say. I s'pose you'd jump straight on a train and make a dash for home. And wouldn't the girls be mad on you! Why, you could have any one of them you liked. And you'd build yourself a new house; although the money's hardly enough for a house."

"No, not for a house. Timber's dear up our way."

"At least you'd repair the old one. And what about a horse? Have you got a horse?"

"Yes, but it's a feeble old thing."

"So you'll need to buy a new horse. A first-rate horse. And a cow. . . . And some sheep. And some poultry, eh?"

"Ekh, don't mention it! Couldn't I set myself up fine!"

"You could, brother. And life would be like a song. I know a thing or two about

such things myself. I had a nest of my own once. My father was one of the richest men in the village."

Chelkash was scarcely rowing. The boat was tossed by the waves splashing mischievously against its sides, and it made almost no progress through the dark waters, now growing more and more playful. The two men sat there rocking and looking about them, each absorbed in his own dreams. Chelkash had reminded Gavrilla of his village in the hope of quieting the boy's nerves and cheering him up. He had done so with his tongue in his cheek, but as he taunted his companion with reminders of the joys of peasant life, joys which he himself had long since ceased to value and had quite forgotten until this moment, he gradually let himself be carried away, and before he knew it he himself was expounding on the subject instead of questioning the boy about the village and its affairs.

"The best thing about peasant life is that a man's free, he's his own boss. He's got his own house, even if it's a poor one. And he's got his own land—maybe only a little

patch, but it's his. He's a king, once he's got his own land. He's a man to be reckoned with. He can demand respect from anybody, can't he?" he ended up with animation.

Gavrilla looked at him curiously, and he, too, became animated. In the course of their talk he had forgotten who this man was; he saw in him only another peasant like himself, glued fast to the land by the sweat of many generations of forefathers, bound to it by memories of childhood; a peasant who of his own free choice had severed connections with the land and with labour on the land, for which he had been duly punished.

"True, brother. How very true! Look at you, now; what are you without any land? The land, brother, is like your mother; there's no forgetting it."

Chelkash came back to his surroundings. Again he felt that burning sensation in his chest that always troubled him when his pride —the pride of a reckless dare-devil—was injured, especially if injured by someone he considered a nonentity.

"Trying to teach me!" he said fiercely.

"Did you think I meant what I said? Know your place, upstart!"

"You're a funny one," said Gavrilla with his former timidity. "I didn't mean you. There's lots of others like you. God, how many miserable people there are in the world! Homeless tramps."

"Here, take over the oars," snapped Chelkash, holding back the flood of oaths that surged in his throat.

Once more they exchanged places, and as Chelkash climbed over the bundles he had an irresistible desire to give Gavrilla a push that would send him flying into the water.

They did no more talking, but Gavrilla emanated the breath of the village even when he was silent. Chelkash became so engrossed in thoughts of the past that he forgot to steer, and the current turned the boat out to sea. The waves seemed to sense that this boat was without a pilot, and they played with it gleefully, tossing it on their crests and leaping in little blue flames about the oars. In front of Chelkash's eyes passed a kaleidoscope of the past, of the distant past,

separated from the present by the gulf of eleven years of vagrancy. He saw himself as a child, saw his native village, saw his mother, a stout red-cheeked woman with kindly grey eyes, and his father, a stern-faced, red-bearded giant. He saw himself as a bridegroom, and he saw his bride, the plump black-eyed Anfisa with a mild, cheerful disposition and a long plait hanging down her back. Again he saw himself, this time as a handsome Guardsman; again his father, now grey-haired and stooped with labour; and his mother, wrinkled and bent to earth. He saw the reception the village gave him when his army service was over, and he recalled how proud his father had been to show off this healthy, handsome, bewhiskered soldier-son to the neighbours. Memory is the bane of those who have come to misfortune; it brings to life the very stones of the past, and adds a drop of honey even to the bitterest portion drunk at some far time.

It was as if a gentle stream of native air were wafted over Chelkash, bringing to his ears his mother's tender words, his father's earnest peasant speech and many other forgotten

sounds; bringing to his nostrils the fragrance of mother-earth as it thawed, as it was new-ploughed, as it drew on an emerald coverlet of springing rye. He felt lonely, uprooted, thrown once and for all beyond the pale of that way of life which had produced the blood flowing in his veins.

"Hey, where are we going?" cried Gavrilla.

Chelkash started and glanced about with the alertness of a bird of prey.

"Look where we've drifted, damn it all. Row harder."

"Daydreaming?" smiled Gavrilla.

"Tired."

"No danger of getting caught with them things?" asked Gavrilla, giving the bundles a little kick.

"No, have no fear. I'll turn them in now and get my money."

"Five hundred?"

"At least."

"God, what a pile! If only I had it! Wouldn't I play a pretty tune with it, just!"

"A peasant tune?"

"What else? I'd. . . ."

And Gavrilla soared on the wings of his

imagination. Chelkash said nothing. His moustache drooped, his right side had been drenched by a wave, his eyes were sunken and lustreless. All the hawkishness had gone out of him, had been wrung out of him by a humiliating introspection that even glanced out of the folds of his filthy shirt.

He turned the boat sharply about and steered it towards a black form rising out of the water.

Once more the sky was veiled in clouds and a fine warm rain set in, making cheerful little plopping sounds as its drops struck the water.

"Stop! Hold it!" ordered Chelkash.

The nose of the boat ran into the side of a barge.

"Are they asleep or what, the bastards?" growled Chelkash as he slipped a boat-hook into some ropes hanging over the side. "Throw down the ladder! And the rain had to wait till this minute to come down! Hey, you sponges! Hey!"

"Selkash?" purred someone on deck.

"Where's the ladder?"

"Kalimera, Selkash."

"The ladder, God damn you!"

"Oo, what a temper he's in tonight! Eloy!"

"Climb up, Gavrilla," said Chelkash to his companion.

The next minute they were on deck, where three bearded, dark-skinned fellows were talking animatedly in a lisping tongue as they stared over the gunwale into Chelkash's boat. A fourth, wrapped in a long chlamys, went over to Chelkash and shook his hand without a word, then threw Gavrilla a questioning look.

"Have the money ready in the morning," Chelkash said to him briefly. "I'm going to take a snooze now. Come along, Gavrilla. Are you hungry?"

"I'm sleepy," said Gavrilla. Five minutes later he was snoring loudly while Chelkash sat beside him trying on somebody else's boots, spitting off to one side and whistling a sad tune through his teeth. Presently he stretched out beside Gavrilla with his hands behind his head and lay there with his moustache twitching.

The barge rolled on the waves, a board creaked plaintively, the rain beat on the

deck and the waves against the sides of the barge. It was all very mournful and reminded one of the cradle-song of a mother who has little hope of seeing her child happy.

Chelkash bared his teeth, raised his head, glanced about him, muttered something to himself and lay down again with his legs spread wide apart, making him look like a pair of giant scissors.

III

He was the first to wake up. He glanced anxiously about him, was instantly reassured, and looked down at Gavrilla, who was snoring happily, a smile spread all over his wholesome, sunburnt, boyish face. Chelkash gave a sigh and climbed up a narrow rope-ladder. A patch of lead-coloured sky peered down the hatchway. It was light, but the day was dull and dreary, as is often so in autumn.

Chelkash came back in a couple of hours. His face was red and his whiskers had been given a rakish twist. He was wearing a sturdy pair of high-boots, a leather hunting jacket

and breeches as a hunter wears. The outfit was not new, but in good condition and very becoming to him, since it filled out his figure, rounded off the edges and gave him a certain military air.

"Get up, puppy," said he, giving Gavrilla a little kick.

Gavrilla jumped up only half-awake and gazed at Chelkash with frightened eyes, not recognizing him. Chelkash burst out laughing.

"Don't you look grand!" said Gavrilla with a broad grin at last. "Quite the gentleman."

"That don't take us long. But you're a lily-livered fellow if there ever was one. How many times were you about to pass out last night?"

"You can't blame me; I'd never been on a job like that before. I might have lost my soul."

"Would you do it again, eh?"

"Again? Only if—how shall I put it? What would I get for it?"

"If you got, let's say, two smackers?"

"You mean two hundred rubles? Not bad. I might."

"And what about losing your soul?"

"Maybe I wouldn't lose it after all," grinned Gavrilla.

"You wouldn't lose it, and you'd be made for the rest of your life."

Chelkash laughed gaily.

"Well, enough of joking; let's go ashore."

And so they found themselves in the boat again, Chelkash steering, Gavrilla rowing. Above them stretched a solid canopy of grey clouds; the sea was a dull green and it played joyfully with the boat, tossing it up on waves that had not yet grown to any size, and throwing handfuls of pale spray against its sides. Far up ahead could be glimpsed a strip of yellow sand, while behind them stretched the sea, chopped up into coveys of white-caps. Behind them, too, were the ships—a whole forest of masts back there to the left, with the white buildings of the port as a background. A dull rumble came pouring out of the port over the sea, mingling with the roar of the waves to form fine strong music. And over everything hung a thin veil of fog that made all objects seem remote.

"Ekh, it'll be something to see by nightfall!" exclaimed Chelkash, nodding out to sea.

"A storm?" asked Gavrilla as he ploughed powerfully through the waves with his oars. His clothes were soaked with wind-blown spray.

"Uh-huh," said Chelkash.

Gavrilla looked at him inquisitively.

"Well, how much did they give you?" he asked at last, seeing that Chelkash had no intention of broaching the subject.

"Look," and Chelkash pulled something out of his pocket and held it out.

Gavrilla's eyes were dazzled by the sight of so many crisp bright bank-notes.

"And here I was thinking you had lied to me! How much is it?"

"Five hundred and forty."

"Phe-e-w!" gasped Gavrilla, following the course of the notes back to the pocket with greedy eyes. "God! If only I had that much money!" and he gave a doleful sigh.

"You and me'll go on a big spree, mate," cried Chelkash ecstatically. "We'll paint the town red. You'll get your share, never

fear. I'll give you forty. That enough, eh? Give it straight away if you want me to."

"All right, I'll take it if you don't mind."

Gavrilla was shaking with anticipation.

"Ekh, you scarecrow, you! 'I'll take it!' Here, go ahead and take it. Take it, damn it all. I don't know what to do with so much money. Do me a favour and take some of it off my hands."

Chelkash held out several notes to Gavrilla, who let go of the oars to clutch them in trembling fingers and thrust them inside his shirt, screwing up his eyes as he did so and taking in great gulps of air as if he had just scalded his throat. Chelkash watched him, a squeamish smile on his lips. Once more Gavrilla picked up the oars and began to row nervously, hurriedly, with his eyes cast down, like a man who has just had a bad fright. His shoulders and ears were twitching.

"You're a greedy bloke. That's no good. But what's to be expected?—you're a peasant," mused Chelkash.

"A man can do anything with money!" exclaimed Gavrilla in a sudden flare of excitement. And then hurriedly, incoherently,

chasing his thoughts and catching his words on the fly, he drew the contrast between life in the village with money and without it. Honour, comfort, pleasure!

Chelkash followed him attentively, his face grave, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. From time to time he would give a pleased smile.

"Here we are!" he interrupted Gavrilla's tirade.

The boat was caught on a wave that drove it into the sand.

"Well, this is the end. But we've got to pull the boat up good and high so that it don't get washed away. Some people will come for it. And now it's good-bye. We're about ten versts from town. You going back to town?"

Chelkash's face was beaming with a sly and good-natured smile, as if he were contemplating something very pleasant for himself and very unexpected for Gavrilla. He thrust his hand into his pocket and rustled the notes there.

"No—I'm not going. I'm—I'm—" Gavrilla stammered as if choking.

Chelkash looked at him.

"What's eating you?" he said.

"Nothing." But Gavrilla's face turned first red, then grey, and he kept shifting on his feet as if he wanted to throw himself at Chelkash or do something else of insuperable difficulty.

Chelkash was nonplussed by the boy's agitation. He waited to see what would come of it.

Gavrilla broke into laughter that sounded more like sobbing. His head was hanging, so that Chelkash could not see the expression of his face, but he could see his ears going from red to white.

"To hell with you," said Chelkash with a disgusted wave of his hand. "Are you in love with me, or what? Squirming like a girl. Or maybe you can't bear to part with me? Speak up, spineless, or I'll just walk off."

"You'll walk off?" shrieked Gavrilla.

The deserted beach trembled at the shriek, and the ripples of yellow sand made up by the washing of the waves seemed to heave. Chelkash himself started. All of a sudden Gavrilla rushed towards Chelkash, threw

himself at his feet, seized him round the knees and gave him a tug. Chelkash staggered and sat down heavily in the sand; clenching his teeth, he swung up his long arm with the hand closed in a tight fist. But the blow was intercepted by Gavrilla's pleadings, uttered in a cringing whisper:

"Give me that money, there's a good fellow! For the love of Christ give it to me. What do you need with it? Look, in just one night—in one single night! And it would take me years and years. Give it to me. I'll pray for you. All my life. In three churches. For the salvation of your soul. You'll only throw it to the winds, while I? I'll put it in the land. Give it to me! What is it to you? It comes so easy. One night, and you're a rich man. Do a good deed once in your life. After all, you're a lost soul; there's nothing ahead of you. And I'd—oh what wouldn't I do with it! Give it to me!"

Chelkash—frightened, dumbfounded, infuriated—sat in the sand leaning back on his elbows; sat without a word, his eyes boring into this boy whose head was pressed against his knees as he gasped out his plea.

At last Chelkash jumped to his feet, thrust his hand into his pocket and threw the notes at Gavrilla.

"Here, lick it up!" he cried, trembling with excitement, with pity and loathing for this greedy slave. He felt heroic when he had tossed him the money.

"I was going to give you more anyway. Went soft last night thinking of my own village. Thought to myself: I'll help the lad. But I waited to see if you'd ask for it. And you did, you milksop, you beggar, you. Is it worth tormenting yourself like that for money? Fool. Greedy devils. No pride. They'd sell themselves for five kopeks."

"May Christ watch over you! What's this I've got? Why, I'm a rich man now!" squealed Gavrilla, twitching all over in ecstasy and hiding the money inside his shirt. "Bless you, my friend. I'll never forget you. Never. And I'll have my wife and children say prayers for you, too."

As Chelkash heard his joyful squeals and looked at his beaming face distorted by this paroxysm of greed, he realized that, thief

and drunk that he was, he would never stoop so low, would never be so grasping, so lacking in self-pride. Never, never! And this thought and this feeling, filling him with a sense of his own freedom, made him linger there beside Gavrilla on the shore of the sea.

"You've made me a present of happiness," cried Gavrilla, snatching Chelkash's hand and pressing it against his own face.

Chelkash bared his teeth like a wolf but said nothing.

"And just to think what I almost did!" went on Gavrilla. "On the way here I thought —to myself—I'll hit him—you, that is—over the head—with an oar—bang!—take the money—and throw him—you, that is—overboard. Who'd ever miss him? And if they found his body—nobody'd bother to find out who did it and how. He's not worth making a fuss over. Nobody needs him. Nobody'd go to the trouble."

"Hand over that money!" roared Chelkash, seizing Gavrilla by the throat.

Gavrilla wrenched away once, twice, but Chelkash's arm wound about him like a snake. The sound of a shirt ripping, and—

there was Gavrilla flat on his back in the sand, his eyes popping out of his head, his fingers clutching the air, his feet kicking helplessly. Chelkash stood over him lean, erect, hawk-like, his teeth bared as he gave a hard dry laugh, his whiskers twitching nervously on his sharp bony face. Never in all his life had he been wounded so cruelly, and never had he been so furious.

"Well, are you happy now?" he laughed, then turned on his heel and set off in the direction of the town. Before he had gone five steps Gavrilla arched himself like a cat, sprang to his feet, swung out with his arm and hurled a big stone at him.

"Take that!"

Chelkash let out a grunt, put his hands to his head, staggered forward, turned round to Gavrilla, and fell on his face in the sand. Gavrilla was frozen with fear. Chelkash moved one leg, tried to lift his head, stretched out, trembling like a harp string. Then Gavrilla ran for all he was worth, ran out into the dark space where a shaggy black cloud was hanging over the fog-enshrouded steppe. The

waves rustled as they scurried up the sand, mingled with the sand for a brief moment, scurried back again. The foam hissed and the air was filled with spray.

It began to rain. At first it came down in single drops, but soon turned into a torrent that came pouring out of the sky in thin streams. These streams wove a net of watery threads that enveloped the whole expanse of the steppe, the whole expanse of the sea. Gavrilla was swallowed up in it. For a long time nothing was to be seen but the rain and the long figure of the man laying in the sand at the edge of the sea. Then Gavrilla came swooping like a bird out of the darkness. When he reached Chelkash he fell on his knees beside him and tried to lift him up. His hand came in contact with something warm and red and sticky. He shuddered and started back, with a wild expression on his white face.

"Get up, brother, get up!" he whispered in Chelkash's ear above the noise of the rain.

Chelkash opened his eyes and gave Gavrilla a little push.

"Go away," he whispered hoarsely.

"Brother! Forgive me! It was the devil's doings," whispered Gavrilla trembling as he kissed Chelkash's hand.

"Go away. Leave me."

"Take this sin off my soul. Forgive me, brother."

"Away! Go away! Go to hell!" Chelkash suddenly cried out and sat up in the sand. His face was white and angry, his eyes were hazy and kept closing as if he were sleepy. "What else do you want? You've done what you wanted to do. Go away. Get out!" He tried to give the grief-stricken Gavrilla a kick, but he could not and would have collapsed again had not Gavrilla put an arm round his shoulders. Chelkash's face was on a level with Gavrilla's. Both faces were white and dreadful to see.

"Bah!" And Chelkash spat into the wide-open eyes of his assistant.

Gavrilla humbly wiped his face on his sleeve.

"Do what you want to me," he whispered. "I won't say a word. Forgive me, in the name of Christ."

"Scum. Can't even do your dirty work like a man," cried Chelkash scathingly as he slipped his hand inside his jacket and ripped off a piece of shirt with which he silently bound his head, grinding his teeth from time to time. "Have you taken the money?" he asked through his teeth.

"I haven't, brother. And I won't. I don't want it. Nothing but bad luck comes of it."

Chelkash thrust his hand into a pocket of his jacket, pulled out the pile of notes, peeled off a hundred-ruble one, put it back into his pocket, and threw the rest at Gavrilla.

"Take it and go away."

"I won't, brother. I can't. Forgive me what I've done."

"Take it, I say," roared Chelkash, rolling his eyes fearfully.

"Forgive me. I can't take it if you don't," said Gavrilla humbly, falling at Chelkash's feet in the rain-drenched sand.

"That's a lie. You will take it, you scum," said Chelkash with conviction. Pulling up his companion's head by the hair, he thrust the money under his nose.

"Take it. Take it. You didn't work for nothing. Don't be afraid, take it. And don't be ashamed that you almost killed a man. Nobody would hunt you down for killing a man like me. They'd even say thank you if they found out. Here, take it."

Seeing that Chelkash was laughing, Gavrilla's heart grew lighter. He clutched the money.

"And do you forgive me, brother? Don't you want to do that for me?" he begged tearfully.

"My beloved friend," replied Chelkash in the same vein, as he got up and stood swaying on his feet. "What's there to forgive? Nothing to forgive. Today you get me; tomorrow I get you."

"Ah brother, brother," sighed Gavrilla disconsolately, shaking his head.

Chelkash stood in front of him with an odd smile on his face. The rag on his head, which had gradually been getting redder, resembled a Turkish fez.

The rain had become a downpour. The sea gave a low roar, the waves hurled themselves savagely at the shore.

The two men were silent.

"Well, good-bye," said Chelkash mockingly as he turned to go.

He staggered, his legs were shaking, and he held his head as if afraid of losing it.

"Forgive me, brother," pleaded Gavrilla once more.

"That's all right," said Chelkash coldly, setting off.

He stumbled away, holding his head with his left hand, pulling gently at his dark moustache with his right.

Gavrilla stood watching him until he disappeared in the rain which kept coming down in fine endless streams, enveloping the steppe in impenetrable steel-grey gloom.

Then he took off his wet cap, crossed himself, looked at the money in his hand, heaved a deep sigh of relief, hid the money in his shirt, and strode off firmly down the shore in the opposite direction to that taken by Chelkash.

The sea growled as it hurled its huge waves on the sand, smashing them to foam and spray. The rain lashed at the water and the land. The wind howled. The air was filled

with a roar, a howl, a murmur. The rain cut off sight of sea and sky.

Soon the rain and the spray washed away the red spot on the sand where Chelkash had lain, washed away the footsteps of Chelkash, washed away the footsteps of the youth who had walked so bravely down the beach. And not a sign was left on this deserted shore to testify to the little drama enacted here by these two men.

1894

ABOUT A LITTLE BOY AND A LITTLE GIRL WHO DID NOT FREEZE TO DEATH

A Christmas Story

IT HAS become the custom to freeze a number of little boys and girls to death once a year in Christmas stories. The little poor boy or the little poor girl of a respectable Christmas story ordinarily stands gazing through the window of a mansion admiring the Christmas-tree blazing in the splendid drawing-room, and then freezes to death, bitter and despairing.

I appreciate the good intentions of the authors, despite the cruel manner in which they despatch with their little heroes and heroines; I know that the authors freeze these little poor children to remind little

rich children of their existence, but as for me, I could not bring myself to freeze a little poor boy or a little poor girl to death even for such a noble purpose.

I myself have never frozen to death and have never witnessed the freezing to death of a little poor boy or girl, and therefore I am afraid I might make myself ridiculous if I attempted to describe the sensation of freezing to death. And besides, it seems a bit preposterous to kill off one living creature just to remind another living creature of his existence.

And that is why I prefer to tell a story about a little boy and a little girl who did not freeze to death.

It was six o'clock of a Christmas Eve. The wind was blowing, raising up clouds of snow. These cold diaphanous clouds, light and graceful as crushed gauze, whirled about everywhere; they whisked across the faces of passers-by, pricking the cheeks like needles of ice, and sprinkled the heads of the horses with snow. The horses bobbed their heads and neighed loudly, blowing clouds of steam out of their nostrils. A covering of

hoar-frost turned wires into white plush cords. The sky was clear and full of stars. They shone so brightly it seemed as if someone had used brass-polish on them for the occasion, which was hardly probable.

The streets were crowded and noisy. Horses pranced down the roadway, people walked along the pavements, some of them hurriedly, others unhurriedly: the former hurried because they had cares and responsibilities and did not have warm coats; the latter dawdled because they did not have cares or responsibilities and did have warm coats, even fur coats.

It was to one of these people who did not have cares but who did have a fur coat, and one with a very handsome collar—it was straight under the feet of this gentleman, who was walking along very properly, that two little balls of rags and tatters rolled, and at the same time two little voices were heard.

"Kind sir . . ." piped the voice of a little girl.

"Most honoured gentleman . . ." chimed in the voice of a little boy.

"Could you spare a mite for us poor 'uns?"

"A kopek for bread. For the holiday," they ended in chorus.

They were my hero and heroine—little poor children; the boy was named Mishka Pryshch, the girl Katka Ryabaya.

Since the gentleman did not stop, the children kept diving under his feet and crossing in front of him, while Katka, breathless with expectation, whispered: "Just a mite, just a mite," and Mishka did his best to get in the gentleman's way.

And when the gentleman had had just about all he could take of this, he threw open his fur coat, pulled out his purse, held it up to his nose and breathed into it snuffily as he extracted a coin, which he thrust into one of the very small and exceedingly dirty hands outstretched to him.

In a trice the two balls of rags had rolled out of the gentleman's path and come to rest in a gateway, where they stood clinging to each other for a while and glancing silently up and down the street.

"Didn't see us, the old devil," whispered

the little poor boy in a tone of malicious triumph.

"He's gone to the izvozchiks round the corner," explained the girl. "How much did he give, that swell?"

"Ten kopeks," said Mishka indifferently.

"So how much does that make?"

"Seven tens and seven kopeks."

"That much? Then we'll go home soon, won't we? It's cold."

"Plenty of time for that," said Mishka discouragingly. "See you don't work too open. If the copper sees you he'll take you in and give you a clipping. Here comes a barge. Let's go!"

The barge was a fat woman in a fur cloak, which shows that Mishka was a very naughty boy, very coarse and disrespectful to his elders.

"Kind lady . . ." he wailed.

"In the name of the Virgin . . ." put in Katka.

"Pshaw! She couldn't squeeze out more than three kopeks, the damned old sow," swore Mishka, and made another dash for the gateway.

The snow still swept up and down the street and the wind grew sharper. The telegraph wires hummed, the snow creaked beneath the runners of the sleighs, and from somewhere far down the street came a woman's ringing laughter.

"Think Aunt Anfisa will get drunk again tonight?" asked Katka, pressing closer to her companion.

"I s'pose so. What's to keep her from drinking? She will," replied Mishka definitely.

The wind blew the snow off the roofs and began to whistle a Christmas tune. A doorweight banged. It was followed by the slamming of glass doors, and a deep voice called out:

"Izvozchik!"

"Let's go home," said Katka.

"The old song," snapped the long-suffering Mishka. "What makes you want to go home?"

"It's warm there," Katka explained briefly.

"Warm!" mocked Mishka. "And when they all get together and make you dance, how

will you like that? Or pour vodka down your throat and make you throw up like the last time? Home? Bah!"

And he hunched his shoulders with the air of a man who knows his worth and is certain of the correctness of his opinions. Katka yawned convulsively and collapsed in a corner of the gateway.

"You just keep mum. If it's cold, grit your teeth and bear it. It'll pass. You and me'll get warmed up one of these days. I know, I do. What I want, is—"

And here he broke off to force his lady to evince curiosity as to what he wanted. But she only snuggled down without showing the slightest curiosity. At which Mishka warned her, somewhat anxiously:

"See you don't go to sleep! You might freeze to death. Hey, Katka!"

"Never fear, I won't," said Katka with chattering teeth.

Had it not been for Mishka, Katka might indeed have frozen to death, but that knowing little scamp firmly resolved to prevent her doing anything so trite on Christmas Eve.

"Get up. It's worse when you're down. When you're up you're bigger, and it's harder for the cold to get you. Big ones are too much for the cold. Take horses, for instance. They never freeze. People are smaller than horses, and so they're always freezing. Get up, I tell you. When we've got a ruble we'll call it a day."

Katka, who was shivering all over, got up.

"It's—it's awful cold," she whispered.

It had, in fact, become extremely cold. Gradually the clouds of snow had grown into dense whirlwinds which here took the form of pillars, there—of long veils studded with diamonds. They made a pretty sight billowing above street lamps or streaming past the brightly lit shop-windows. They sparkled with a myriad of colours whose sharp cold glitter hurt the eye.

But the beauty of all this did not interest my little hero and heroine.

"Oho!" said Mishka, thrusting his nose out of his hole. "Here comes a whole flock! Up and at them, Katka!"

"Kind gentleman . . ." wailed the little

girl in a tremulous voice as she darted out into the street.

"The least little mite, mister," pleaded Mishka, and then, shouting: "Run, Katka!"

"The imps! Just let me lay hands on you!" sputtered a tall policeman who suddenly appeared on the pavement.

But they were not to be seen. The two shaggy balls had rolled swiftly out of sight.

"Gone, the little devils," snorted the policeman, and smiled good-naturedly as he gazed down the street.

The little devils were running and laughing for all they were worth. Katka kept catching her foot in her rags and falling down.

"Heavens, down again!" she would say as she struggled to her feet and looked behind her fearfully, laughing in spite of herself. "Where is he?"

Mishka, holding his sides with laughter, kept lunging into passers-by, an offence which earned him not a few smart fillips.

"Stop it . . . devil take you . . . just look at her! You simpleton, you! Whoop, there she goes again! Was there ever anything so funny?"

Katka's falls put him in high spirits.

"He'll never catch us now, we can slow down. He's not a bad sort. That other one, the one that whistled—once I was running, and all of a sudden—smack! straight into the belly of the night watchman! Whacked my head against his rattle."

"I remember. Got a lump this big," and Katka broke into another peal of laughter.

"All right, that's enough," Mishka interrupted soberly. "Listen to what I have to say."

They walked along side by side looking grave and anxious.

"I lied to you back there. That swell slipped me twenty kopeks, not ten. And I lied before that, too. So that you wouldn't say it was time to go home. Today's been a good day. Know how much we took in? A ruble and five kopeks. That's a lot!"

"Isn't it," breathed Katka. "You could almost buy a pair of boots with that much—at the second-hand market."

"Boots, humph! I'll steal you a pair of boots. Just wait a bit. I've had my eye on a certain pair for some time. Just wait,

I'll snitch them. But here's what: let's go to a pub now, shall we?"

"Auntie'll find out again and give it to us—like she did that other time," said Katka apprehensively, but her tone belied an inclination to succumb to the temptation of warming herself in a pub.

"Give it to us? No, she won't. We'll find a pub, you and me, where not a living soul will know who we are."

"Will we?" whispered Katka hopefully.

"So here's what we'll do: first and foremost we'll buy half a pound of sausage—eight kopeks; a pound of white bread—five kopeks. That makes thirteen. Then we'll buy two sweet buns for three kopeks each—six kopeks; that's nineteen. Then a pot of tea—six; there's a quarter for you. Think of that! And we'll have left—"

Mishka faltered and grew silent. Katka gave him a grave, questioning look.

"That's an awful lot to spend" she ventured mildly.

"Shut up. Wait. It's not so much. In fact, it's very little. We'll eat another eight kopeks' worth. Thirty-three in all. If we

do it at all, we may as well do it right. It's Christmas, isn't it? So we'll have left . . . if it's a quarter of a ruble . . . eight ten-kopek pieces . . . and if it's thirty-three . . . seven ten-kopek pieces and something left over. See how much? What more can she expect, the damned old witch! Come along! Make it quick!"

Hand in hand, they went hopping and skipping along the pavement. The snow blew into their eyes and blinded them. Now and again a cloud of snow would swoop down upon them and wrap both their little forms in a transparent sheet that they quickly rent in their dash for food and warmth.

"Listen," gasped Katka, out of breath from rushing so, "I don't care what you think . . . but if she finds out . . . I'll say it was . . . all your doing. I don't care. You always run away . . . and I have to take it . . . she always catches me . . . and beats me worse than you. That's what I'll say, mind."

"Go ahead and say it," nodded Mishka. "If she licks me . . . I'll get over it. Go ahead. . . . Say it if you want to."

He was feeling very gallant, and walked along whistling, his head thrown back. He had a thin face with roguish eyes that usually wore an expression too old for his age; his nose was sharp and slightly curved.

"Here's the pub. Even two. Which shall it be?"

"The little one. But first to the grocer's. C'mon!"

When they had bought all the food they wanted, they went into the little pub.

It was full of smoke and steam and a heavy sour smell. Tramps, izvozchiks and soldiers were sitting in the murky shadows, while superbly filthy waiters moved among the tables. Everything in the place seemed to be shouting, singing, and swearing.

Mishka spied an empty table in the corner, nimbly made his way to it, took his coat off, then went to the bar. Casting shy glances about her, Katka, too, began to take off her coat.

"May I have some tea, mister?" said Mishka to the man, beating lightly with his fists on the counter.

"Tea? Quite. Help yourself. And go and fetch some hot water. Mind you don't break anything. I'll teach you a thing or two if you do."

But Mishka had run off for the water.

Two minutes later he was sitting gravely beside his girl, rolling himself a cigarette with the air of a drayman who has put in a good day's work. Katka was looking at him admiringly, awed by the easy grace with which he deported himself in public. For the life of her she could not feel at ease amid the deafening roar of the pub, and the least of her fears was that at any moment they would be "thrown out on their ear." But she would not for the world have had Mishka guess her thoughts, and so she patted down her tow-coloured hair and tried to look about her very simply and unaffectedly. The effort to do so brought floods of colour to her smudged cheeks, and she screwed up her blue eyes to hide her embarrassment. Meanwhile, Mishka instructed her solemnly, trying to imitate the tone and phrascology of a yard porter named Signei, whom he

found to be a very impressive person, even if he was a drunk, and had just spent three months in jail for stealing.

"So let's say, for example, you're begging. How do you go about begging? It's no damn good just saying, 'Be so kind, be so kind.' That's no way. What you've got to do is get under the bloke's feet—make him afraid he'll fall over you."

"I'll do it," agreed Katka meekly.

"Good," said her companion with an approving nod. "That's the thing. And then take Aunt Anfisa for example. What's Aunt Anfisa? First of all, she's a sot. And besides. . . ."

And Misha announced with commendable frankness just what Aunt Anfisa was besides.

Katka nodded her head, fully agreeing with his appraisal of their aunt.

"You don't obey her, and that's not right. You ought to say, for instance, 'I'll be a good girl, Auntie, I'll mind what you say. . . .' In other words, give her a lot of soft soap, and then do what you please. That's the way."

Mishka fell silent and scratched his stomach impressively, as Signei always did when he had delivered himself of a speech. Since no other topic presented itself, he gave a little toss of his head and said:

"Well, let's eat."

"Let's," nodded Katka, who for some time had been eying the bread and sausage hungrily.

And they began to eat their supper in the damp smelly obscurity of the ill-lighted pub, to the accompaniment of bawdy songs and coarse oaths. Both of them ate with feeling, with discrimination, with little pauses, like true Epicureans. And if Katka, losing her sense of propriety, greedily took a bite that made her cheek stick out and her eyes pop comically, the staid Mishka would remark indulgently:

"Rushing ahead there, aren't you, lady?"

At which she would almost choke in her haste to swallow down the unseemly bite.

And that is the end of my story. I have not the slightest qualms about leaving these children to wind up their Christmas Eve,

You can be quite sure there is no danger of their freezing to death. They are in their element. Why in the world should I make them freeze to death?

I find it the height of folly to freeze children to death who are sure to meet their doom in a way that is much more simple and ordinary.

1894

SONG OF THE FALCON

THE BOUNDLESS sea, lapping lazily where the shore-line ran, slumbering motionless in the distance, was steeped in blue moonlight. Soft and silvery, it merged at the horizon with the blue of the southern sky and slept soundly, mirroring the transparent fabric of fleecy clouds that also hung motionless, veiling, but not concealing, the golden tracery of the stars. The sky seemed to be bending down to the sea, trying to catch what the restless waves were whispering as they washed languidly over the shore.

The mountains, covered with wind-broken trees, hurled their jagged peaks into the blue wastes above, where their harsh

contours were softened by the warm and caressing darkness of the southern night.

The mountains were gravely contemplative. Their dark shadows lay like confining garments upon the surging green waves, as if they wished to stay the tide, to silence the ceaseless plashing of the water, the sighing of the foam—all sounds violating the mysterious silence which flooded the scene, as did the silvery blue radiance of a moon not yet emerged from behind mountain peaks.

"Al-lah ak-bar!" came softly from the lips of Nadir Ragim ogly, an aged Crimean herdsman—tall, white-haired, tanned by southern sun—a lean and wise old man.

He and I were lying in the sand beside a huge rock draped in shadow and overgrown by moss—a sad and sombre rock that had broken away from its native mountain. One side of it was festooned with seaweed and water plants which seemed to bind it to the narrow strip of sand between sea and mountains. The flames of our camp-fire lighted the shore-side, and their flicker sent shadows dancing upon its ancient surface, scarred by a network of deep cracks.

Ragim and I were boiling some fish we had just caught, and we were both in a mood that made everything seem lucid, inspired, accessible to the understanding; our hearts were light and innocent and the only thing we wanted to do was lie here and dream.

The sea lapped at the shore, the sound of the waves so gentle that they seemed begging to warm themselves at our fire. Now and then the even hum of the surf was interrupted by a higher and more playful note: that would be one of the bolder waves creeping to our very feet.

Ragim lay facing the sea, his elbows dug into the sand, his head in his hands, gazing thoughtfully into the shadowy distance. His sheepskin hat had slipped to the back of his head and a fresh sea breeze fanned his high forehead covered with fine lines. He made philosophical observations, unconcerned as to whether I listened or not, as if he were talking to the sea.

"A man who serves God faithfully goes to heaven. And one who does not serve God or the Prophet? Maybe he's out there—in

that foam. Maybe those silver spots on the water are him. Who knows?"

The dark and heaving sea grew brighter, and patches of moonlight were scattered haphazardly over its surface. The moon had slipped out from behind the shaggy mountain-tops and was now dreamily pouring its radiance on the shore, on the rock beside which we were lying, and on the sea, which rose to meet it with a little sigh.

"Ragim, tell me a story," I said to the old man.

"What for?" he asked, without turning his head.

"Oh, just because I enjoy listening to your stories."

"I've told you all of them. I don't know any more."

He wanted to be coaxed, and I coaxed him.

"If you want me to, I'll sing you a song," he consented.

I was only too glad to listen to one of his old songs, and so he began reciting in a sing-song voice, trying to preserve the cadence of the ancient melody.

I

HIGH in the mountains crawled a Snake, and it came to rest in a misty gorge looking down on the sea.

High in the sky shone the sun, and the breath of the mountains rose hot in the sky, and the waves down below broke loud on the rocks.

And swift through the gorge, through the darkness and mist, flowed a river, up-turning the stones in its rush to the sea.

Crested with foam, vigorous, hoary, it cut through the rock and plunged to the sea with an angry roar.

Suddenly a Falcon with blood on its wings and a wound in its breast fell out of the sky, fell into the gorge where the Snake lay coiled.

It uttered a cry as it struck the earth and lay beating its wings on the rock in despair.

The Snake was frightened and darted away, but soon it saw that the bird was doomed, that the bird would die in a minute or two.

So back it crawled to the wounded bird and tauntingly hissed in its ear:

"So soon must thou die?"

"So soon must I die," said the Falcon, sighing. "But oh, I have lived! I have tasted of happiness, fought a good fight! I have soared in the sky! Never shalt thou, poor thing, see the sky as have I!"

"The sky? What is that? Why, nothing at all. Could I crawl in the sky? Far better this gorge—so warm and so damp."

Thus said the Snake to the Falcon, the lover of freedom. And it laughed in its heart at the Falcon's brave words.

And it thought to itself: what matters it whether one flies or one crawls? The end is the same: all will lie in the earth, all to dust will return.

Of a sudden the Falcon up-lifted its head and swept the dark gorge with a lowering glance.

Water came oozing from cracks in the rock, and the air of the gorge smelt of death and decay.

With a mighty effort the Falcon cried out in sorrow and longing:

"Ah, to soar in the sky, to soar once again!. . . I would capture the foe . . . crush

his head to my breast . . . make him choke on my blood. . . . Oh, the joy of the struggle!"

Thought the Snake: it must really be fine to live in the sky if it wrings such a cry from the Falcon!

And it said to the Falcon, the lover of freedom: "Crawl out to the cliff's edge and throw thyself over. Perhaps thy wings will carry thee still, and again thou shalt soar in the sky."

A tremor passed over the Falcon. It gave a proud cry and crawled out on the cliff, seeking a hold in the slime.

And on reaching the edge it spread wide its wings, drew a deep breath, and, with a flash of its eyes, plunged into space.

Swift as a stone fell the Falcon, scattering feathers, tearing its wings as it fell.

A wave caught it up, washed it of blood, wrapped it in foam, and carried it down to the sea.

Mournful the cry of the waves of the sea as they broke on the face of the cliff. And gone was the bird—lost to sight in the vast expanse of the sea.

II

For long the Snake lay coiled in the gorge, pondering the death of the bird, pondering its love of the sky.

And it glanced into space, where dreams are born to comfort the restless heart.

"What did it see, that hapless Falcon, in emptiness—space without end? Why should such birds rob others of peace with their passion for soaring? What is revealed in the sky? All this can I learn in a single flight, be it ever so brief."

Thus having spoken, it coiled itself tighter, leaped into space, and flashed, a dark streak, in the sun.

But never shall those born to crawl, learn to fly. Down on the rocks fell the Snake, but not to its death did it fall. It laughed, and it said:

"So this is the joy of the flight: the joy of the fall! Oh, foolish birds! Unhappy on earth, which they know not, they would climb to the sky and live in its throbbing expanses. But what is the sky but an emptiness? Light in abundance, but nothing to sustain the

body. Why, then, such pride? And why such contempt? To hide from the world their mad aspirations, their failure to cope with the business of life? Ridiculous birds! Never again will your words deceive me. For now I know all. I have seen the sky. I have mounted, explored it; and out of the sky have I fallen, though not to my death. All the stronger has grown my faith in myself. Let them live with illusions who love not the earth. I have found out the truth. Never again shall I heed the birds' challenge. Born of the earth, I am earthly."

So saying, it coiled on a stone, full of pride in itself.

The sea was shining, a dazzle of light, and fiercely the waves beat the shore.

In their leonine roar rang the song of the Falcon. Trembled the rocks from the blows of the sea; trembled the sky from the notes of the song:

"We sing a song to the madness of daring!

"The madness of daring is the wisdom of life. Oh, Falcon undaunted! Thou hast shed precious blood in the fight with the foe, but the time will yet come when the drops

of thy blood will glow like sparks in the gloom of life and fire brave hearts with love of freedom and light.

"Thou hast paid with thy life. But thou shalt live on in the songs of the brave, a proud challenge to struggle for freedom and light!

"We sing a song to the madness of daring!"

. . . Silent are the opalescent reaches of the sea. Softly sing the waves lapping the shore, and I, too, am silent as I gaze into the distance. Now there are more silvery patches of moonlight on the water. . . . Our kettle is humming quietly.

One of the waves outdistances its brothers and gives a mocking little cry as it reaches for Ragim's head.

"Get back! Where do you think you're going?" cries Ragim, waving his hand, and the wave rolls back obediently.

I find nothing funny or startling in Ragim's personification of the wave. Everything about us is exceptionally alive, gentle and soothing. The sea is calm, and one feels power in the cool breath it wafts

towards mountain peaks still charged with the heat of the day. In golden letters upon the dark blue background of the sky the stars have traced a solemn message, something enchanting the soul and disturbing the mind with the sweet expectation of a revelation.

Everything is drowsing, but with tense awareness, as if in another moment all objects would shake off their slumber and lift their voices in a choir of unutterably sweet harmony. This harmony would speak of the mysteries of life, would explain them to the mind and then extinguish the mind like a phantom flame and whisk the soul up into the blue spaces of the night where the delicate tracery of the stars sings the same divine music of revelation.

1895

EXPOSURE

Down the village street, past its white clay huts, moved a crowd of people shouting loudly.

The procession moved slowly, like an enormous wave, and in front of it walked a mangy horse with drooping head. Whenever it lifted a front leg it bobbed its head as if about to fall forward and bury its nose in the dust of the road, and when it moved a back leg its hind-quarters sagged as if about to collapse.

A young woman scarcely out of her teens, very small and stark naked, was tied by the wrists to the dashboard of the cart. She walked sidewise, her knees trembling and threatening to give way under her; her head,

covered with dishevelled dark hair, was tipped upwards and her wide-open eyes gazed into space with a blank inhuman stare. Her body was striped and dotted with black-and-blue marks; her firm maiden-like left breast had been gashed, and blood was streaming from it. The blood formed a red line passing over her stomach and down her left leg to the knee, and the calves of her slender legs were caked with dust. It was as if a long narrow ribbon of skin had been stripped off the woman's body. And no doubt her belly had been beaten with a club or trampled on by booted feet, so horribly swollen and discoloured was it.

The woman could hardly drag one foot after the other through the grey dust; her whole body was twisted, and one wondered how her legs which, like her body, were covered with bruises, could support her; how she kept from falling down and being dragged over the ground by the arms.

A tall muzhik was standing in the cart. He was wearing a white Russian blouse and a black Astrakhan hat, from under which a lock of bright red hair hung down over

his forehead. In one hand he held the reins, in the other a whip with which he systematically struck out first at the horse, then at the little woman who already had been beaten beyond recognition. The man's eyes were bloodshot and flashed with vindictive triumph; his hair threw them into greenish shadow. The sleeves of his blouse were rolled up to reveal muscular arms covered with red fuzz. His mouth was open, showing two rows of sharp white teeth, and from time to time he would shout hoarsely:

"Take that, you bitch! Ha-ha! And that!"

Behind the woman and the cart came the crowd—shrieking, laughing, hooting, whistling, goading, jeering. Urchins darted here and there. Occasionally one of them would run ahead and shout filthy words into the woman's face. Then a burst of laughter from the crowd would drown out the thin whistle of the whip through the air. The faces of the women in the crowd wore a look of unusual animation and their eyes sparkled with pleasure. The men kept shouting obscenities to the muzhik standing in the cart. He would turn round to them and laugh loudly, open-

ing his mouth as wide as possible. Suddenly the whip lashed out at the woman's body. Long and thin, it circled round her shoulders and struck her under the arm. At that the muzhik gave it a sudden jerk, and with a shrill cry the woman fell on her back in the dust. People from the crowd sprang forward and hid her body from view as they bent over her.

The horse came to a halt, but a moment later it was plodding ahead again and the shamed woman was walking behind it. And as the horse moved on it kept shaking its frowsy head, as much as to say:

"What a fate to be a horse that people can make do any of their loathsome tasks!"

And the sky, the southern sky, was without blemish. Not a sign of a cloud was to be seen, and the sun lavishly poured its warm rays upon the earth.

. . . . . .

What I have written is not a picture of retributive justice conceived by my imagination. No, unfortunately it is not something I have made up. It is called "Exposure," and is a means by which husbands

punish unfaithful wives. It is a picture taken from life; it is one of our customs, and I was witness to it on the 15th of July, 1891, in the village of Kandybovka, Kherson Gubernia, Nikolayevsky District.

I had heard that in the Volga region where I come from, women who deceived their husbands were tarred and feathered. I knew that there had been cases of inventive husbands and fathers-in-law smearing unfaithful wives with treacle in the summertime and tying them to trees to be stung and bitten by insects. I had also heard that occasionally such women were bound and thrown on to ant-hills.

Now the witness of my own eyes has proved to me that such things are really possible among ignorant, heartless people whose dog-eat-dog way of life has turned them into wild beasts consumed by greed and envy.

1895

A MITE OF A GIRL

"Just a mite of a girl she was, stranger."

Every time I recall this phrase, two pairs of old and feeble eyes smile at me through the years—smile with a soft and tender smile full of love and compassion; and I hear two cracked voices impressing on me in identical tones that she was "just a mite of a girl."

And I am made happy and hopeful by this remembrance, the best of all those relating to those ten months I spent tramping the winding roads of this my native land—a land so vast and sorrowful.

On my way from Zadonsk to Voronezh I overtook two pilgrims, an old man and an

old woman. Both of them seemed to be over a hundred years old, so slowly and haltingly did they walk, so painfully did they lift their feet out of the scorching dust of the road. There was an illusive something in their dress and their faces that led one to assume they had come a long way.

"All the way on foot from Tobolskaya Gubernia,[1] with God's help," said the old man in confirmation of my assumption.

As we walked along, the old woman looked at me with kindly eyes that had once been blue and added with a sigh and a benign smile:

"All the way from the X Factory in the village of Lysaya, my old man and me."

"Aren't you very tired?"

"Not very. We can still make our way, still crawl on, by the grace of God."

"Did you make a vow to come, or is it just an old-age pilgrimage?"

"We made a vow, stranger. We made a vow to the saints of the Kiev and the So-

[1] A far province in Siberia to which political prisoners were exiled by the tsarist government.—*Tr.*

lovki monasteries. A vow," repeated the old man, and then, turning to his companion: "Come mother, let's sit down and ease our bones a bit."

"Let's," said she.

And so we sat down in the shade of an old willow growing at the side of the road. The day was hot, the sky cloudless; before and behind us wound the road into the heat-hazy distance. It was a quiet lonely spot. On either side of the road stretched fields of sickly rye.

"They've sucked the earth dry," said the old man, handing me a few stalks he had plucked.

We talked about the earth and about the cruel dependence of the peasants on its charity. The old woman sighed as she listened to us, and from time to time she would contribute a wise and knowing word.

"If she was alive, how she would strain her poor muscles in a field like that," said the old woman suddenly, glancing round at the rows of stunted, shrivelled rye and the bald spots in the field where it did not grow at all.

"Ah, yes, she would have worn herself out," said the old man, shaking his head.

There was a pause.

"Who are you talking about?" I asked.

The old man smiled good-naturedly.

"About a certain little lass," he said.

"She was quartered on us. One of the gentlefolk," sighed the old woman.

And then they both looked at me, and as if by mutual consent said in unison, slowly and plaintively:

"Such a mite of a girl she was!"

The odd way in which they said it went to my heart; the words sounded almost like a last rite intoned by these two faltering voices. And suddenly the old man and woman began to talk so quickly that they fairly took the words out of each other's mouths and kept me, who was sitting between them, turning my head from one to the other.

"A gendarme brought her to our village and turned her over to the elders. 'Quarter her on someone,' he said—"

"In other words, find her a home," explained the old man.

"And they sent her to us."

"You should have seen her—all red and shivering with cold."

"Such a mite of a girl!"

"It made us cry to see her—"

"Lord, thinks us, to have sent such a one to such a place!"

"For what reason? For what offence?"

"It's from these parts she came—"

"The west, that is—"

"We put her up on the stove-bunk first—"

"Ours is a big stove and a warm one," sighed the old woman.

"And then we gave her to eat."

"How she laughed!"

"She had shining black eyes, like a mouse's—"

"She was like a mouse herself, so round and smooth."

"When she felt better she began to cry. 'Thank you, dears,' she said."

"And then how she did set the house on end!"

"How she did turn things upside down!" laughed the old man gleefully, screwing up his eyes.

"Went bouncing like a ball about our hut—here, there, everywhere, putting this in order, putting that in order. 'The swills,' says she, 'are to go out to the pigs.' And she picks up the swill-tub herself, and then she slips, and plop! in go her arms up to the shoulder. My, oh my! What a sight!"

And both of them laughed till they coughed and had to wipe the tears from their eyes.

"And then the pigs—"

"Kissed them right on the snout!"

"'Out with the pigs, too!' says she. 'The hut's no place for pigs!'"

"For a whole week she made order—"

"Worked both of us to a sweat—"

"Laughing and shouting and stamping her little feet—"

"And then all of a sudden going quiet and solemn—"

"As if she was going to die—"

"Bursting into tears and crying as if her heart would break. I'd fuss about her, wondering what could be the matter. Such a strange thing. And I'd cry myself, cry without knowing why. And I'd put my arms

about her and there we'd be, both of us crying our eyes out—"

"As was only natural. After all, she was little more than a child—"

"And us all alone. One son in the army, the other in the gold-fields—"

"And her only seventeen years old—"

"Seventeen! No one would give her more than twelve!"

"Come now, that's stretching it a point, father. Twelve's stretching it."

"And would you give her more? Would you, now?"

"Why, she was a ripe little piece. As for her being so little, is that to be held against her?"

"And am I holding it against her? Tut, tut!"

"You're not," conceded the old woman good-naturedly.

Their quarrel over, they both grew silent.

"And what happened after that?" I asked.

"After that? Why, nothing, stranger," sighed the old man.

"She died. Died of the fire-fever," and two tears stole down the old woman's wrinkled cheeks.

"She died, stranger; only lived with us two years. Everybody in the village knew her. The village, did I say? Why, lots more knew her. She had learning and would sit in council with the elders. Sometimes she spoke sharp, but nobody minded. A clever one."

"Ah, but it was her heart that counted. She had the heart of an angel. There was room in her heart for all our troubles, and she took them all to herself. She was a lady like any other from the town, with a velvet jacket and ribbons and shoes, and she read books and all that, but how she did understand us peasants! She knew all there was to know about us. 'How did you learn it, dear?' 'It's all written in the books,' she would say. Fancy that! But why should she have cared? She ought to have got married and been a lady, and instead they sent her here, and—she died."

"It was funny to see her teaching everybody. Such a tiny little thing, and teaching everybody so serious: you mustn't do this, you mustn't do that—"

"Oh, she had learning, indeed she did!

And how she worried about everything, about everybody! If someone was sick, off she went to cure him; if someone was—"

"Her mind was wandering when she died; she kept saying, 'Mama, Mama,'—so plaintive-like. We sent for the priest, thinking he might bring her back to us. But she didn't wait for him, the darling; she passed away."

Tears streamed down the old woman's face, and a feeling of beatitude came over me, as if these tears were being shed for me.

"The whole village gathered at our house, crowded into the yard, into the roadway, saying 'What? Is it possible?' They loved her so."

"And where else could such a lass be found?" sighed the old man.

"All the people gave her burial. And at Shrovetide her forty days were over, and it came to us: why should we not go on a pilgrimage to pray for her soul? And the neighbours, too, said why not indeed? Go, they said. You are free, with no work-bonds to hold you. Perhaps your prayers will be added to her account. And so we went."

"You mean you have done this for her?" I asked.

"For her; for that blessed child. The dear Lord may hear our prayers, sinners though we be, and absolve her of sin. In the first week of Lent we set out, on a Tuesday it was—"

"For her!" I repeated.

"For her, stranger," said the old man.

I wanted to hear them say again and again that it was just to pray for the soul of this girl they had come these thousands of versts. It struck me as being too wonderful to believe. And so anxious was I to be convinced that it was only "for her," the little lass with the black eyes, that they had done this marvellous thing, that I suggested all sorts of other possible motives. But to my enormous satisfaction they convinced me there was no other.

"And have you really come all this way on foot?"

"Oh, dear no! Sometimes we ride. Ride for a day, then walk for a day. Labouring along, little by little. We're too old to go the whole way on foot. God sees how old we are. It would be different if it was her feet we walked on."

And once more they interrupted each other in their eagerness to talk about her, a young girl whom fate had cast on such a distant shore, so far from home and mother, to die of the "fire-fever."

. . . . . .

Two hours later we got up and went on our way. My thoughts were all about this girl, but try as I might I could not conjure up an image of her. And it was a hurtful thing to realize the feebleness of my imagination.

It is always hard for a Russian to imagine the good and the beautiful. . . .

Soon we were overtaken by a Ukrainian driving a cart. He threw us a melancholy glance and lifted his cap in response to our bows.

"Climb in. I'll take you to the next village," he called to the old couple.

They climbed in and were swallowed up in a cloud of dust. And I walked on in this cloud with my eyes on the cart that was taking away the old man and the old woman who had come thousands of versts to pray for the soul of a mite of a girl who had made them love her.

1895

KOLUSHA

In the pauper's corner of the cemetery among leaf-strewn, rain-washed, wind-worn grave mounds, a woman in a worn gingham dress and with a black shawl over her head was sitting on one of the graves in the lacy shadow cast by two sickly birches.

A strand of greying hair hung down over one withered cheek, her fine lips were tightly compressed and their corners drooped, forming mournful lines on either side of her mouth; the lids of her eyes, too, had the droop that comes of much weeping and of lying awake for long weary nights.

She sat without stirring as I stood at some distance observing her, nor did she move even when I drew closer; she merely raised

big lustreless eyes to mine and let them fall again without showing the least curiosity, embarrassment, or any other sentiment which my approach might be expected to arouse.

I said a word in greeting and asked who was buried there.

"My son," she replied with resigned indifference.

"A big boy?"

"Twelve years old."

"When did he die?"

"Four years ago."

She drew a deep breath and tucked the stray lock back under her shawl. It was a hot day. The sun blazed mercilessly down on this city of the dead; the scanty grass on the graves had turned brown from heat and dust, and the dusty scraggy trees that stuck up dismally among the crosses were as motionless as if they, too, were dead.

"What did he die of?" I asked, nodding toward the boy's grave.

"Trampled to death by horses," she replied briefly, reaching out a wrinkled hand to stroke the grave.

"How did it happen?"

I knew I was showing a lack of delicacy, but I was intrigued and irritated by this woman's impassivity. Some inexplicable whim made me want to see tears in her eyes. There was something unnatural in her indifference, and at the same time I could see it was not affected.

My question made her raise her eyes to mine again. And when she had silently scrutinized me from head to foot she gave a little sigh and began to tell her story in an even, pensive voice.

"This is how it happened. His father was in jail for a year and a half for embezzlement, and in that time we ate up all the money we had saved; it wasn't much, the money we had saved. By the time my man got out of jail I was burning horse-radish for firewood. A gardener I knew gave me a waggonload of spoiled horse-radish. I dried it and burned it together with dried manure. They smoked dreadful and made the food taste bad. Kolusha went to school. He was a quick lad and very thrifty. He'd always bring home any logs or sticks he happened to find on his way from school. It was spring, then; the snow

was melting and Kolusha had nothing but felt boots to wear. When he pulled them off, his feet were as red as red. Just at that time they let his father out of jail and brought him home in carriage. He'd had a stroke in jail. He lay there looking up at me with a crooked sort of smile on his face, and I looked down at him and thought to myself: It's you who brought me to this, and now how am I going to feed you? Throw you in a puddle, that's what I'd like to do with you! But Kolusha cried when he saw him—went white as a sheet and great big tears ran down his cheeks. 'What's the matter with him, Mummy?' he asked. 'He's lived his day,' I said. And from then on things went from bad to worse. I worked my fingers to the bone, but try as I might I couldn't make more than twenty kopeks, and that only on lucky days. Worse than death it was, and I was often tempted to lay hands on myself. Kolusha saw this and went about in a black mood. Once when I thought I couldn't stand it any longer I says: 'This accursed life of mine! If only I could die, or if one of you would!'—that to Kolusha and his father. His father just nodded

his head, as much as to say: I'll be going soon, don't scold; just be patient. But Kolusha gave me a long look and then turned and went out of the house. As soon as he was gone I was sorry for my words, but it was too late. Too late. Not an hour had passed before a policeman comes riding up. 'Are you *Gospozha* Shishenina?' he says. My heart sank. 'You're wanted at the hospital,' he says. 'Merchant Anokhin's horses ran over your boy.' I rode straight off to the hospital. It was as if somebody had spread hot coals on the carriage seat, and I kept saying to myself: You wretched woman, what have you done?

"We got there at last. Kolusha was lying in bed all bandaged up. He smiled at me . . . and tears rolled down his cheeks . . . and he whispered: 'Forgive me, Mummy. The policeman's got the money.' 'What money are you talking about, Kolusha?' I says. 'Why, the money the people in the street gave me, and Anokhin, too,' he says. 'What did they give you money for?' I says. 'For this,' he says, and gives a weak little groan. His eyes were big as saucers. 'Kolusha,' I says, 'how is it you didn't see the horses coming?' And

then he says to me, very plain and clear: 'I did see them, Mummy, but I didn't want to get out of the way because I thought if they ran over me the people would give me money. And they did.' Those were his very words. Then I saw everything and I understood what he had done, my angel, but it was too late. The next morning he died. His mind was clear to the very end and he kept saying: 'Buy Daddy this and that, and buy something for yourself, too.' As if there was lots and lots of money. There really was forty-seven rubles. I went to merchant Anokhin, but he only gave me five rubles and grumbled about even that. 'The boy threw himself under the horses,' he said. 'Lots of people saw it, so what are you coming begging for?' I never went back. So that's how it happened, young man."

She stopped talking and became as cold and indifferent as before.

The cemetery was quiet and deserted; the crosses, the sickly trees, the mounds of earth, and this impassive woman sitting on the grave in such a mournful attitude—all these things made me reflect on death and human suffering.

But the sky was cloudless and poured a withering heat down upon the earth.

I took some coins out of my pocket and held them out to this woman who, killed by misfortune, still went on living.

She nodded and said with strange slowness:

"Do not trouble yourself, young man. I have enough for today. I don't need much any more; I'm all alone. All alone in the world."

She gave a deep sigh and once more pressed her thin lips into that grief-twisted line.

1895

THE WOMAN WITH THE BLUE EYES

I

Assistant Police Officer Podshiblo, a fat and melancholic Ukrainian, was sitting in his office twisting his moustache and staring balefully out of the window into the yard of the police-station. It was dark and stuffy in the office and very quiet, the only sound being the ticking of the clock pendulum as it monotonously counted off the minutes. Out in the yard it was so bright and inviting! Three birches growing in the middle of it gave abundant shade, and in this shade policeman Kukharin, who had just come off duty, was sleeping on a pile of hay intended for the

fire-horses. It was this sight that roused the ire of Assistant Police Officer Podshiblo. His subordinate could sleep while he, the unfortunate chief, had to sit in this hole and breathe in the smelly vapours given off by the four stone walls! He imagined the pleasure with which *he* would have slept on that fragrant hay in the shade of the birches if time and position had allowed, and the thought made him stretch and yawn and grow more wroth than ever. He had an irresistible desire to wake up that Kukharin.

"Hey, you! Hey, you swine! Kukharin!" he roared.

The door opened behind him and someone came into the office. Podshiblo went on looking out of the window without turning round and without experiencing the least curiosity as to who had come in and was standing in the door-way with the floor-boards creaking under his weight. Kukharin did not so much as stir in response to his shouts. He was sleeping soundly with his hands under his head and his beard pointing up at the sky, and it seemed to the Assistant Police Officer that he could hear his subordinate snoring in a

mocking tantalizing way that increased his own longing for a nap and his exasperation at not being able to take it. He felt an urge to go down and give Kukharin a good kick in his fat belly and then drag him by the beard out of the shade into the blazing sun.

"Hey, you, snoozing out there! Hear me?"

"Your Honour, it's me who's on duty," said a soft voice behind him.

Podshiblo turned round and glared at the policeman, who was looking at him with blank popping eyes as he waited for orders that would send him dashing off.

"Did I send for you?"

"No, sir."

"Did I ask for you?" Podshiblo raised his voice and twisted round in his chair.

"No, sir."

"Then get to hell out of here before I throw something at your head!" His left hand was already feeling for something on the desk and his right had taken firm hold of the back of the chair, but the policeman ducked through the door and was gone. Such an exit was not to the liking of the Assistant Police Officer, who found it disrespectful. Furthermore, he

was badly in need of giving vent to the bad temper induced by the stuffiness, the work, the coming Fair, and many other unpleasantnesses that forced their way into his mind without his asking.

"Come back!" he shouted through the door.

The policeman came back and stood stiffly in the door-way with a look of terrified expectation on his face.

"You oaf!" growled Podshiblo. "Go down into the yard and wake up that ass of a Kukharin and tell him the station yard's no place to snore in! Get along with you!"

"Yes, sir. There's a woman asking—"

"What's that?"

"A woman—"

"What kind of a woman?"

"A tall one—"

"Idiot! What does she want?"

"To see you—"

"Ask her what for. Get out!"

"I did ask her. She won't tell. Says she wants to speak to Your Honour herself."

"Damn these women! Have her come up. Is she young?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, show her up. Quick, now," said Podshiblo in milder tones. He straightened up and leafed through some papers on his desk, and his glum countenance took on a stern official look.

Behind him he heard the rustle of a woman's skirts.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, half turning to his client and taking her in with a critical eye. She bowed without a word and sailed slowly towards the desk, gazing at the officer with grave blue eyes that looked out from under drawn brows. She was dressed poorly and simply, like a woman of the lower middle class, wearing a shawl on her head and a worn grey cape over her shoulders whose ends she kept twisting in the slender fingers of her pretty little hands. She was tall and plump and full-busted, had a high forehead, and was more grave and stern than most women. She seemed to be about twenty-seven. She walked slowly and thoughtfully, as if saying to herself: perhaps I had better turn back.

"A fine specimen, a regular grenadier," thought Podshiblo as soon as he caught sight of her. "One of your trouble-makers."

"I should like to know," she began in a deep rich voice and then broke off, her blue eyes resting uncertainly on the officer's bewhiskered face.

"Please sit down. What is it you would like to know?" asked Podshiblo in an official tone, thinking to himself: very nice and juicy.

"I've come about those cards," she said.

"Residence cards?"

"No, not those."

"Then what ones?"

"Those that—the ones that are given to—to women," she said falteringly, blushing crimson.

"What's that? What sort of women?" asked Podshiblo, lifting his eyebrows and smiling playfully.

"Different sorts—who walk the streets—at night."

"Tut, tut, tut! You mean prostitutes?" grinned Podshiblo.

"Yes, that's what I mean." The woman took a deep breath and smiled, too, as if it was easier for her now that the word had been pronounced.

"You don't say! Hm. Well—" began Podshiblo, anticipating something exciting.

"It's about those cards I've come," went on the woman, dropping on to a chair with a sigh and giving her head an odd toss as if someone had struck her.

"I see. So you're thinking of running a house? Hm."

"No. I want a card for myself," and she let her head fall very low.

"Oh. Where's your old card?" asked Podshiblo as he moved his chair closer to hers and reached out for her waist, one eye on the door.

"What old card? I haven't got any." She threw him a swift glance but did nothing to avoid his touch.

"So you worked in secret, did you? Without being registered? Some do so. But now you want to be registered? That's right. Safer," said Podshiblo encouragingly, pressing his attentions on her more boldly.

"I've never done it before," blurted out the woman, dropping her eyes.

"Really? How's that? I don't understand," said Podshiblo with a shrug of his shoulders.

"I'm just thinking of it. For the first time I came here to the Fair," explained the woman softly, without raising her eyes.

"So that's it!" Podshiblo took his hand off her waist, pushed back his chair and leaned back, nonplussed.

Both of them were silent.

"So that's how it is. Hm. You want—hm. It's wrong, of course. And hard. That is, you see—But after all—well, it's very strange. To tell you the truth, I don't see how you can bring yourself to do it. That is, if what you say is true."

Being an experienced police officer, he could see it was true. She looked too wholesome and decent to be a member of that well-known profession. The signs of the trade which stamp themselves on a prostitute's face and manners, however inexperienced she is, were not to be found on hers.

"It's true, on my honour," she said, leaning towards him in a burst of confidence. "Would I bother to lie, once I had decided on such a wretched thing? Of course not. But I've just got to make money. I'm a widow. My husband—he was a steamboat pilot—

was drowned when the ice broke last April. I've got two kids—a little boy of nine and a little girl of seven. And no money. Nor relatives. I was an orphan when I got married. My husband's relatives live far away, but they never liked me—they're well-off and they look on me as a beggar. Who can I turn to? I could go to work, of course. But I need a lot of money, more than I could ever earn. My boy studies at the gymnasium. I suppose I could file a request to have him study free of charge, but who would pay any attention to it, coming from me, a lone woman? And he's such a smart little fellow. It would be too bad to take him out of school. My little girl, too—she needs all sorts of things. As for an honest job, there aren't many of them to be had. And even if I did find one, how much could I make? And what could I do? Be a cook? I'd only make five rubles a month. Not enough. Not nearly enough. While in this business, if a woman's lucky she can make enough in one go to feed her family a whole year. One of our women made over four hundred rubles at the last Fair. With that little pile she married the forest warden and now

she lives like a lady. Getting on fine. If it wasn't for the shame—the disgrace. But judge for yourself. It's fate, I guess. It's always fate. If this idea could have taken root in my mind, I must be meant to carry it out. Fate put me up to it. If I make money—all well and good; if it brings me nothing but shame and misery—fate again. That's how I see it."

Podshiblo grasped every word she said, for her whole face spoke to him. At first she wore a frightened look, but gradually it changed to one of cold resolution.

The Assistant Police Officer felt very uncomfortable and even a bit nervous.

Let a woman like that get hold of some fool and she'll skin him alive and pick all the meat off his bones, was the explanation he gave of his apprehension, and when she had finished he said drily:

"I'm sorry, but there's nothing I can do for you. Apply to the Chief of Police. That's his business—and the Medical Commission's. I have nothing to do with it."

He was anxious to get rid of her. She instantly got up, made him a little bow and glided

slowly over to the door. Podshiblo watched her go with tight lips and narrowed eyes, and it was all he could do to keep from spitting after her.

"So it's to the Chief of Police I must go?" she asked, turning round when she got to the door. Her blue eyes looked at him with calm determination; a deep, hard line cut across her forehead.

"That's right," Podshiblo hastened to reply.

"Good-bye. Thank you," and she went out.

The Assistant Police Officer put his elbows on his desk and sat there whistling something to himself for about ten minutes.

"The bitch, eh?" he muttered out loud without lifting his head. "Children! What have children got to do with it? Humph! The hussy!"

And again he was silent for a long time.

"But life, too—if what she said was the truth. It twists a person round its little finger. Hm. Very hard on a person."

After a moment's pause he summed up all the work of his brain in a deep sigh, a snap of his fingers, and an energetic ejaculation:

"The slut!"

"Did you send for me?" asked the policeman on duty, who was again in the door-way.

"Huh?"

"Did you send for me, Your Honour?"

"Get out!"

"Yes, sir."

"Idiot!" muttered Podshiblo and glanced out of the window.

Kukharin was still sleeping on the hay; evidently the policeman on duty had forgotten to wake him up.

But the Assistant Police Officer's indignation was gone; the sight of the slumbering policeman did not affect him in the least. Something had frightened him. In his mind's eye he kept seeing that woman's calm blue eyes. They were looking straight at him determinedly, and this depressed him and made him feel uneasy.

With a glance at the clock he tightened his belt and walked out of the office.

"I suppose I'll see her again some time. I'm bound to," he muttered.

II

And he did.

One evening as he was standing on duty outside the Main Office, he noticed her about five paces away. She was going towards the Square with that same slow gliding walk. Her blue eyes were staring straight ahead, and there was something in her figure, so tall and graceful; something in the movement of her hips and bust; something in the resigned expression of her eyes that held a person off. The deep line in her brow, which showed too great a resignation to fate and was more noticeable now than when he had first seen her, spoiled her round Russian face by making it too severe.

Podshiblo twisted his moustache, indulged certain playful fancies, and decided not to let her get out of sight.

"Just wait, you crocodile, you!" was the warning he mentally shouted after her.

Five minutes later he was sitting beside her on one of the benches in the square.

"Don't you recognize me?" he asked with a smile.

She raised her eyes and regarded him calmly.

"Yes. How do you do," she said in a dejected tone without offering him her hand.

"Well, how are things? Did you get yourself a card?"

"Here it is," and she fumbled in the pocket of her dress with that same air of resignation.

This embarrassed him.

"Oh, you don't have to show it to me, I believe you. And besides, I have no right—that is—how are you making out?" As soon as he had asked the question, he said to himself: What the deuce do I care? And why should I beat round the bush with her? Come straight out with it, Podshiblo!

But however he encouraged himself with similar exhortations, he could not make himself "come straight out with it." There was something about her that kept a person from broaching a certain subject.

"How am I making out? Not bad, praise the—" She broke off and turned red.

"That's very nice. Congratulations. Hard until you get used to it I suppose, isn't it?"

Suddenly she leaned towards him, her face

white and twisted and her mouth round, as if she wanted to cry out, but she drew back just as suddenly—drew back and assumed her old attitude.

"That's all right. I'll get used to it," she said in a clear even voice, then took out her handkerchief and blew her nose loudly.

Her proximity, her movements, and her calm immobile blue eyes produced a sinking sensation in the pit of Podshiblo's stomach.

In an access of annoyance, he got up and held out his hand without a word.

"Good-bye," she said gently.

He nodded his head and walked away briskly, cursing himself for being a fool.

"Just you wait, my fine lady! I'll show you yet! Once you get a taste of what I'm like you'll come down off your high horse!" he muttered to himself. And at the same time he realized she had done nothing to warrant such an outburst.

And this made him angrier than ever.

III

One evening of the following week, as Podshiblo was walking from the *caravan-sarai* to the Siberian Pier, he stopped on hearing

oaths, women's shrieks, and other scandalous sounds coming from the window of a tavern.

"Help! Police!" gasped a woman. He heard some frightful clanking blows, the bumping of furniture, and a man's deep voice that drowned out all other sounds:

"That's it! Give it to her again, straight in the snout!" he shouted enthusiastically.

The Assistant Police Officer ran quickly up the stairs, pushed his way through the onlookers clustered about the tavern door, and beheld the following sight: his acquaintance of the blue eyes was lying across a table and holding another woman by the hair with her left hand while she delivered swift and merciless blows to the woman's swollen face with her right.

Her blue eyes were narrowed cruelly, her lips tightly compressed; two deep lines ran from the corners of her mouth to her chin, and her face, once so strangely serene, was now filled with the merciless fury of a wild beast; it was the face of a person ready to torture her kind without end, and to take pleasure in doing it.

The woman she was striking could only mur-

mur faintly, try to pull away and wave her arms in the air.

Podshiblo felt the blood rush to his head; he had a wild desire to avenge someone for something, and, dashing forward, he seized the infuriated woman by the waist and pulled her away.

The table overturned, dishes crashed to the floor, the onlookers let out wild shrieks and laughs.

In a state of frenzy Podshiblo saw all kinds of grimacing red faces flash before his eyes as he held the struggling woman in his arms and hissed in her ear:

"So it's you, is it? Making a scene? A row?"

The blue-eyed woman's victim was lying on the floor among the broken dishes, sobbing and wailing hysterically.

A nimble little man in a long coat explained to Podshiblo what had happened:

"Her, that one, says to this one, Your Honour: 'you hussy,' she says, 'you dirty tart!' So this one gives her a flip, and that one lets go at her with a glass of tea, and then this one grabs that one by the hair and sails into her—smack! And then another smack!

The beating she gives her would do anybody credit! She's got muscles, that woman!"

"She has, has she?" roared Podshiblo, squeezing the woman in his arms harder and feeling a fierce desire to fight himself.

A man with a red neck and a broad back which he arched comically as he leaned out of the window, shouted down into the street:

"Izvozchik! Come here!"

"Come along! Off you go to the police-station! Both of you! Get up, you!. . . What took *you* so long to get here? Don't you know your duty? You oaf! Take them to the station and be quick about it! Both of them!"

A gallant policeman poked first one, then the other woman in the back as he led them away.

"Cognac and soda-water, and be quick about it!" said Podshiblo to the waiter as he sank heavily into a chair by the window, feeling tired and cross with everyone and everything.

* * *

The next morning she stood before him as calm and resolute as she had been the first time they met. She looked straight at him

with her blue eyes and waited for him to speak first.

Podshiblo, who was particularly irritable because he had not had enough sleep, flung papers about his desk, but this did not help him find anything to say to her. Somehow the prejudiced charges and epithets usual to such occasions refused to come off his tongue; he wanted something stronger and more vindictive to hurl in her teeth.

"How did it begin? Come now, speak up."

"She insulted me," declared the woman.

"Think of that! What a crime!" said Podshiblo ironically.

"She has no right to. I'm not to be compared with her."

"Good Lord, and who do you think *you* are?"

"It's need drives me to it, but she—"

"Hm. She does it for pleasure, is that it?"

"Her?"

"Yes, her."

"She hasn't got any kids."

"Enough of that, you scum. Don't think you can get round me with those children of

yours. I'll let you go this time, but if you make trouble again I'll give you twenty-four hours to get out of town. Away from the Fair, understand? Never fear, I know your kind! I'll show you a thing or two! A trouble-maker, eh? I'll teach you, you slut!" The words rolled easily off his tongue, each one more insulting than the last. She grew pale and narrowed her eyes as she had the night before in the tavern.

"Get out!" shouted Podshiblo, bringing his fist down on the desk.

"May the Lord be your judge," she said in a dry and threatening tone, then walked quickly out of the office.

"I'll show you who's judge!" screamed Podshiblo. He took pleasure in insulting her. That serene face and the way she looked straight at him with those blue eyes drove him frantic. Who did she think she was, anyway? Children? Bosh! Presumption! What had children to do with it? An ordinary street-walker, that's what she was, who had come to the Fair to make money and was putting on airs, God only knew why. A martyr . . . driven to it . . . children. Who did she think would

swallow that? She just hadn't the courage to call a spade a spade, and so she tried to blame it on circumstances. Bah!

IV

But there *were* children after all—a shy, tow-headed little boy in an old worn gymnasium uniform and with a black kerchief tied over his ears; and a little girl in a plaid mackintosh that was much too big for her. Both of them were sitting on some boards on the Kashin pier, shivering in an autumn wind and carrying on a quiet conversation. Their mother was standing beside them, leaning against some bales and gazing down at them with adoring blue eyes.

The little boy looked like her. He, too, had blue eyes, and he would frequently twist his head in the cap with the broken peak to smile up at her and say something. The little girl was badly pock-marked. She had a sharp little nose and large grey eyes that had a lively and intelligent sparkle. Various bundles and packages were spread out on the boards about them.

It was the end of September. Rain had been falling all day, the river-bank was muddy and a cold damp wind was blowing.

The Volga was rough, murky waves broke noisily on the bank, the air was filled with a low steady roar. People of all sorts kept coming and going, all of them with anxious looks on their faces as they hastened on their way. And against the seething background of this river scene, the quiet group consisting of a mother and two children instantly caught the eye.

Assistant Police Officer Podshiblo had noticed it, and while he kept at some distance, he watched the three closely. He was aware of their every movement, and for some reason he was ashamed.

In half an hour the Kashin steamboat was to leave from this pier to go up the Volga.

People began to move out on the jetty.

The woman with the blue eyes bent down, straightened up with bags and bundles over her shoulders and under her arms, and went down the steps behind her children, who walked along hand in hand, their share of bundles slung over their shoulders.

Podshiblo had to go out on the jetty, too. He would have preferred not to, but he had no choice, and in a little while he was standing not far from the ticket office.

His acquaintance bought tickets. In her hand she held a bulging brown purse with a roll of bank-notes sticking out of it.

"I want," she said, ". . . that is, here's how it is: the children are to go second class—to Kostroma—and I am to go third. But could I please take one ticket for the two of them? No? You'll make an exception? Oh, thank you so much. God bless you."

And she walked away with a beaming face. The children pressed about her, tugging at her skirt and asking for something. She listened and smiled.

"Goodness gracious, I said I'd buy it, didn't I? Would I deny you anything? Two each? Very well, wait for me here."

She went to some stands near the entrance, where fruit and sweetmeats were sold.

Presently she was back with her children and saying to them:

"Here's some nice-smelling soap for you, Varya—sniff it! And a pen-knife for you,

Petya. See, I didn't forget. And a whole dozen oranges. But don't eat them all at once."

The steamboat drew up at the pier. A jolt. People were thrown off balance. The woman reached out for her children and hugged them to her, glancing round with startled eyes. Seeing there was no cause for alarm, she laughed. The children did, too. The gangway was thrown down and the passengers streamed on to the boat.

"Take your time! Don't push!" shouted Podshiblo to the crowd.

"Hey, you idiot!" he roared to a carpenter who was bristling with hammers, saws, drills, files, and other tools. "Damn it all, make way for the woman with the children! Man, what a dolt you are!" he added more gently as the woman—his acquaintance with the blue eyes—smiled at him in passing and bowed when she was on the boat.

The third whistle.

"Off with the hawsers!" came a command from the captain's bridge.

The boat shuddered and began to move.

Podshiblo searched among the people on

deck for his acquaintance, and when he had found her he doffed his cap and bowed.

She responded by making a low Russian bow and crossing herself.

And so she and her children went back to Kostroma.

When Assistant Police Officer Podshiblo had seen them off, he gave a deep sigh and went back to his post, feeling very glum and unhappy.

1895

HOW SEMAGA WAS CAUGHT

Semaga was sitting all by himself at a table in a tavern with a pint bottle of vodka and fifteen-kopeks worth of stew in front of him.

The basement room with its smoke-blackened vaulted ceiling was lighted by one lamp over the bar and two in the middle of the room. The air was dense with smoke in whose billows floated vague dark forms that talked and sang and swore boisterously, knowing that here they were beyond the law.

One of those fierce storms of late autumn was raging outside, with big stickly snowflakes coming down heavily, but inside it was warm and noisy and had a good familiar smell.

Semaga sat gazing intently through the smoke at the door, his eyes growing sharper every time it opened to let someone in. When this happened he would lean forward slightly and might even raise a hand to shield his face as he scrutinized the features of whoever had entered. And he had good reason to do this.

When he had studied the newcomer in detail and convinced himself of whatever it was he wished to be convinced of, he would pour himself out another glass of vodka, gulp it down, fork half a dozen pieces of meat and potatoes and sit there munching slowly, smacking his lips and licking his bristling soldier-moustache.

A curiously shaggy shadow was cast upon the damp grey wall by his big tousled head, and it bobbed as he chewed, as if it were insistently nodding to someone who made no response.

Semaga's face was broad, high-cheekboned, and beardless; his eyes were big and grey and he had a habit of screwing them up; dark bushy eyebrows shaded his eyes and a curly lock of no-colour hair hung down over the left eyebrow, almost touching it.

On the whole, Semaga's face was not one to inspire trust; there was something disconcerting about the expression of strained determination it wore, an expression out of place even among these people and in this place.

He was wearing a ragged woollen coat tied at the waist with a piece of cord, beside him lay his cap and mittens, and leaning against the back of his chair was a club of impressive dimensions with a bulge at one end formed by the root.

And so he sat on enjoying his meal and was just about to ask for more vodka when the door was thrown open with a bang, and into the tavern rolled something round and ragged that looked for all the world like a big ball of tow coming unwound.

"Beat it, men! A raid!" it cried excitedly in a high childish voice.

The men instantly sat back, fell silent, began to confer anxiously, while from their midst came a few questions in hoarse uneasy voices:

"D'ye mean it?"

"So strike me dead! They're coming from both sides. On horses and on foot. Two officers and ever so many policemen."

"Who are they after, have you heard?"

"Semaga, I guess. They questioned Nikiforich about him," piped the childish voice while the ball-like figure of its owner rolled in the direction of the bar.

"Why, have they caught Nikiforich?" asked Semaga, clapping his cap on to his matted hair and getting up unhurriedly.

"Yes, they just caught him."

"Where?"

"At Aunt Maria's, in Stenka Street."

"You just come from there?"

"Uh-huh. I came rushing here over the garden fences and now I'm off to 'The Barge'; they'll be wanting to know there, too, I guess."

"Run along."

The boy was out of the tavern in a trice. No sooner had the door closed behind him than skinny old Iona Petrovich, the proprietor, a God-fearing man in big spectacles and black skull-cap, called after him:

"Hey, you little imp, you son of Satan! What's this you've done, you accursed offspring of Ham! Gobbled up a whole plateful!"

"Of what?" asked Semaga, who was now making his way to the door.

"Liver. Licked the plate clean. How he ever did it so quick is more than I can see, the scamp! All in one go!"

"So now you'll have to go begging, I suppose," observed Semaga dryly as he went out of the door.

A wet, buffeting wind made little sounds as it swirled above and along the street, and the air was like a mass of boiling porridge, so thickly fell the wet snowflakes.

Semaga stood there listening a moment, but nothing was to be heard but the swish of the wind and the rustle of the snow falling on the walls and roofs of the houses.

He walked off, and when he had taken about ten steps, he climbed over a fence and found himself in somebody's back garden.

A dog barked and in reply a horse neighed and stamped on the floor. Semaga quickly climbed back into the street and set out towards the centre of town, walking faster now.

A few minutes later he heard a noise in front of him that sent him over another fence.

This time he crossed the front yard without mishap, went through the open gate into the garden, climbed other fences and crossed other gardens until he found himself in a street running parallel to the one on which Iona Petrovich's tavern stood.

As he walked he tried to think of a safe place to hide in, but he could not.

All the safe places had become unsafe now that the police had taken it into their heads to make a raid, and the prospect of spending the night outside in such a storm and with the danger of being caught by the raiders or a night watchman was not very cheerful.

He walked on slowly, peering ahead into the white murk of the storm out of which, soundlessly, rose houses, hitching posts, street lamps, trees, all of them plastered with soft clumps of snow.

Above the noise of the storm he caught a strange noise coming from somewhere in front of him. It resembled the soft crying of a baby. He stopped with his neck thrust out in the attitude of a wild animal sensing danger.

The sound died away.

Semaga shook his head and went on, pulling his cap further down over his eyes and hunching up his shoulders to keep the snow out of his neck.

Again he heard a wail, and this time it came from under his very feet. He started, stopped, bent down, felt the ground with his hands, stood up and shook the snow off the bundle he had found.

"A fine how-d'ye-do! A baby! What d'ye think of that!" he muttered to himself as he studied the infant.

It was warm, it wriggled and was all wet with melted snow. Its face, not quite as big as Semaga's fist, was red and wrinkled, its eyes were closed and its tiny mouth kept opening and making little sucking movements. Water dripped off the rags round its face into its tiny toothless mouth.

Dumbstruck as he was, Semaga realized that the baby ought not to swallow the water dripping off these rags, and so he turned the bundle upside down and shook it.

This, it seems, was not to the baby's liking, for it let out a squeal of protest.

"Tut-tut!" said Semaga severely. "Tut-tut!

Not a word, or you'll get it from me! What am I fussing with you for anyway, eh? As if I had any need of you! And you go and cry, you little simpleton!"

But Semaga's words had not the least effect on the baby, which kept on squealing so softly and plaintively that Semaga was very much put out.

"Come, matey, that's not nice. I know you're cold and wet—and that you're just a little shaver, but what the deuce am I to do with you?"

Still the baby squealed.

"There's just nothing I can do with you," said Semaga conclusively, pulling the wrappings tighter round his find and putting it back on the ground.

"Can't be helped. You can see for yourself there's nothing I can do with you. I'm a sort of a foundling myself. So it's good-bye to you and that's that."

And with a wave of his hand Semaga walked off, muttering the while:

"If it wasn't for the raid, maybe I'd find a place to stick you in. But there *is* a raid. What can I do about it? Nothing, matey.

You'll just have to forgive me. It's an innocent soul you are, and your mother's a fiend. If I ever find out who you are, you hussy, I'll break your ribs and knock the stuffings out of you. That'll teach you how to behave next time! Go just so far and no further. O-o-o, you she-devil, you heartless cow! May you die in misery, and may the earth vomit you up. So you think you can go about having babies and throwing them away, do you? And if I drag you through the street by the hair? Oh, I'd do it all right, you strumpet! Don't you know you can't go tossing babies around in a storm like this? They're weak and helpless and they can die from swallowing this snow. Want to pick a nice dry night to throw your babies away in, you fool. They'll live longer on a dry night, and people are more apt to find 'em. As if anybody was out on a night like this!"

At just what point in his reflections Semaga returned to his find and picked it up again he himself did not notice, so engrossed was he in his conversation with its mother. But he did pick it up and put it inside his coat, and after one last withering blast at its mother, he went

on his way with a heavy heart, as pitiable as the baby for whom he felt such pity.

His find wriggled feebly and let out faint peeps that were smothered by the heavy woollen coat and Semaga's enormous paw. Semaga had on nothing but a torn shirt under his coat, and so he soon felt the warmth of the baby's tiny body.

"You little brat!" muttered Semaga as he made his way through the snow. "Your affairs look pretty bad, matey, because what am I supposed to do with you? Tell me that. As for that mother of yours—come, now, lie quiet! You'll fall out."

But the infant kept on wriggling and Semaga felt its warm face rubbing against his breast through a hole in his shirt.

Suddenly Semaga stopped dead in his tracks and exclaimed in a loud voice:

"Why it's the breast he's after! His mother's breast! Good God! His mother's breast!"

And for some reason Semaga began to tremble all over, perhaps from shame, perhaps from fear—from some emotion that was strange, powerful, painful and heart-breaking.

"It takes me for its mother! Ekh, you poor little beastie! What d'ye want of me? And what are you doing to me? I'm a soldier, matey, and a thief, if you must know."

The wind whistled desolately.

"You'd ought to go to sleep. Go to sleep, now. Hush-a-bye. Go to sleep. You'll not get a drop out of me. Sleepy-bye. I'll sing you a song, though it's your ma as ought to be doing that. Come, now, come; lulla-lulla-lullaby. I'm no nursemaid—go to sleep."

And suddenly Semaga, his head bent low over the baby, sang in soft long-drawn tones, as tenderly as he could:

You're a whore and you're a bore,
There's nothing much to love you for.

These words he sang to the tune of a lullaby.

The milky murk kept seething all around and Semaga walked down the pavement with the baby inside his coat, and while the baby kept up its squealing, the thief sang tenderly:

I'll come and see you one fine night,
And when I leave you'll look a fright.

And down his cheeks stole drops of what must have been melting snow. From time to time the thief gave a little shudder, there was a lump in his throat and a weight on his heart, and never had he felt so desolate as while walking down that empty street in the storm with the baby squealing inside his coat.

But he went on just the same.

Behind him he heard dull hoof-beats. The silhouettes of mounted policemen loomed out of the darkness and soon they were beside him.

Two voices asked simultaneously:

"Who goes there?"

"What's your name?"

"What's that you're carrying? Out with it!" ordered one of the policemen, leading his horse straight up the pavement."

"This? A baby."

"Your name?"

"Semaga—from Akhtyr."

"Oho! The very man we're looking for! Get up there in front of my horse!"

"Me and the baby'd better hug the houses. The wind's not so strong there. The middle of the street's no place for us—we're froze as it is."

The policemen did not grasp what he was saying, but they let him keep to the shelter of the houses while they rode as close as possible and did not take their eyes off him.

With such an escort Semaga walked all the way to the police-station.

"So you've caught him, have you? That's fine," said the Chief of Police as they entered his office.

"What about the baby? What am I to do with it?" asked Semaga with a toss of his head.

"What's that? What baby?"

"This one. I found it in the street. Here."

And Semaga pulled his find out of his coat. The baby hung limp in his hands.

"But it's dead!" exclaimed the Chief of Police.

"Dead?" echoed Semaga. He stared down at the little bundle and laid it on the desk.

"Funny," he observed, adding with a sigh: "I'd ought to have picked it up straight away. Maybe if I had—But I didn't. I picked it up and then put it down again."

"What's that you're muttering?" asked the Chief.

Semaga cast a forlorn look about him.

With the death of the baby had died most of the sentiments he had felt while walking down the street.

Here he was surrounded by cold officialdom, with nothing to look forward to but jail and a trial. A sense of injury welled up within him. He glanced reproachfully at the body of the baby and said with a sigh:

"A fine one you are! I let myself get caught on account of you, and all for nothing it turns out. And here I was thinking—But you went and died on me. Humph!"

And Semaga scratched the back of his neck vigorously.

"Lead him away," said the Chief, nodding towards Semaga.

So they led him away.

And that's all.

1895

A READER

It was late at night when I left the house where I had just read one of my published stories to a group of friends. They had been lavish of their praises, and I walked slowly down the street in a pleasant state of excitement, experiencing a joy of life such as I had never known before.

The month was February, the night was clear, and the cloudless sky, thickly studded with stars, breathed an invigorating coldness upon the earth, now richly garbed in new-fallen snow. The branches of the trees hanging over the fences threw a fantastic shadow-pattern across my path and the snow-crystals scintillated joyously in the tender blue shine of the moon. There was not a soul

in sight and the creak of the snow under my boots was the only sound violating the solemn stillness of that clear and memorable night.

"How good it is to be something on this earth, among people," I thought.

And my imagination was not stinting of bright colours in painting a picture of my future.

"Yes, you have written a very nice little thing—no doubt about it," mused someone behind me.

I started with surprise and turned round.

A small man in dark clothes caught me up and glanced into my face with a sharp little smile. Everything about him was sharp: his glance, his cheekbones, his chin, ending in a goatee; his whole small and wizened form had an odd angularity that pricked the eyes. He walked lightly and noiselessly, seeming to glide over the snow. I had not noticed him among the people at the reading and so was astonished by his remark. Who was he? Where had he come from?

"Did you—er—hear my story?" I asked.

"Yes, I had the pleasure."

He spoke in a high voice. He had thin lips and a little black moustache that did not hide his smile. The smile never left his lips and I found this unpleasant; I sensed that it hid a critical appraisal of me that was caustic and unflattering. But I was in too good a humour to dwell for long on this feature of my companion; it flashed before my eyes like a shadow and swiftly faded in the bright light of my self-complacency. I walked along beside him wondering what he would say and secretly hoping he would add to the pleasant moments I had enjoyed that evening. Fate is so sparing of her favours that man has become greedy for them.

"It is pleasant to feel that you are exceptional, isn't it?" asked my companion.

Finding nothing out of the ordinary in the question, I hastened to agree.

"Heh, heh, heh!" he laughed bitingly, rubbing his little hands with their thin claw-like fingers.

"You are a very jolly fellow," I remarked dryly, for his laughter had offended me.

"Oh yes, very," he confirmed with a smile and a nod. "And I am inquisitive as well. I

am always wanting to know things—to know everything. My curiosity never leaves me and that is what keeps me in such high spirits. At present, for instance, I should like to know what your success has cost you."

I glanced down at him and replied without enthusiasm:

"About a month's work. Perhaps a little more."

He pounced on my words. "Ah! A little work and a little experience of life, which always costs something. But that is not a high price to pay for the realization that at present thousands of people are thinking your thoughts as they read your work. And in addition you acquire the hope that perhaps, in time—heh, heh!—after you are dead—heh, heh, heh! In exchange for such acquisitions one might expect you to give more—more, that is, than you have given us so far, don't you think so?"

Again he laughed his biting laugh, gazing at me the while with piercing black eyes. I threw him a glance from my superior height and asked coolly:

"I beg your pardon, but with whom have I the pleasure? . . ."

"Who am I? Can't you guess? Well, I shall not tell you for the present. Do you find a man's name of more importance than what he has to say?"

"Certainly not, but this is so—odd," I replied.

He gave a little tug at my sleeve.

"Let it be odd," he said with a quiet laugh. "Surely a person can allow himself to go beyond the bounds of the ordinary and commonplace once in a while. If you have no objection, let us talk frankly to each other. Assume that I am one of your readers—a queer sort of reader who would like to know how and for what purpose a book is written—by you, for instance. Shall we have such a talk?"

"Oh, do let's," I said. "I shall be delighted. Not every day does one have a chance to talk with such a person." But I was lying, for I found all this extremely unpleasant. What is he after? I thought. And why should I allow this chance encounter with a perfect stranger to assume the nature of a controversy?

And yet I kept on walking slowly beside

him, trying to wear a look of courteous attention, and this, as I remember, I found difficult. But since I was still in a buoyant mood and did not want to offend the gentleman by refusing to talk to him, I tried to take myself in hand.

The moon was shining behind us, throwing our shadows before. They merged into a single dark spot that glided over the snow, and as I watched it I was conscious of something as dark and illusive as our shadows being born within me, something which, like they, seemed to be straining ahead.

My companion was silent for a moment before he said in the confident tone of one who is sole master of his thoughts:

"Nothing is more curious and important than the motives behind human conduct. Do you agree?"

I nodded.

"Good. Then let us speak frankly—and let no opportunity to speak frankly escape you while you are still young."

A queer fellow, I thought, but I was intrigued by his words.

"But what shall we speak about?" I smiled.

He looked into my face with the intimacy of an old acquaintance.

"Let us speak about the aims of literature," he exclaimed.

"Very well . . . only I'm afraid it is too late. . . ."

"Oh, for you it is not yet too late."

I stopped, astonished by his words; he had pronounced them with a gravity that made them sound prophetic. I stopped with a question on my lips, but he took me by the arm and led me on quietly but firmly.

"Don't stop, you're on the right path with me," he said. "Enough of these preliminaries! Tell me this: what is the purpose of literature? You serve its cause; you should know."

My astonishment increased at the expense of my self-composure. What did this man want of me? Who was he?

"Look," I said, "you cannot deny that what is taking place between us—"

"Has its reasons, you can take my word for it. Indeed, nothing ever happens in this world unless it has its reasons. But come, let us hasten—not forward, but into the depths."

Unquestionably he was an interesting specimen, but he vexed me. I made another impatient dart ahead. He followed me, saying calmly:

"I understand. You find it difficult to define the purpose of literature on the spur of the moment. Let me see if I can."

He took a deep breath and looked up at me with a smile:

"I think you will agree with me if I say that the purpose of literature is to help man to know himself, to fortify his belief in himself and support his striving after the truth; to discover the good in people and root out what is ignoble; to kindle shame, wrath, courage in their hearts; to help them acquire a strength dedicated to lofty purposes and sanctify their lives with the holy spirit of beauty. This, then, is my definition; clearly it is sketchy and incomplete; you may add to it whatever else serves to refine life, but tell me, do you accept it?"

"Yes," I said. "It is correct—more or less. It is generally accepted that the purpose of literature is to make men better."

"Just see what a noble cause you serve!"

said my companion with grave emphasis, and then he laughed his caustic laugh: "Heh, heh, heh!"

"But why are you telling me this?" I asked, feigning indifference to his laughter.

"Why do you suppose?"

"To be perfectly frank," I began, trying to think of some withering remark and finding none. What did it mean to be perfectly frank? This man was not stupid; he should have realized how quickly one reaches the border-line of frankness, and with what jealousy this border-line is guarded by one's pride. I glanced into my companion's face and winced from the pain of his smile. What irony and contempt there was in it! I felt that I was beginning to be afraid, and this fear made me want to get away.

"Good-bye," I said shortly, and lifted my hat.

"But why?" he exclaimed.

"I don't like practical jokes that go too far."

"And so you are leaving? That is up to you. But if you leave me now, you and I will never meet again."

He laid special emphasis on the word

"never," so that it rang in my ears like the tolling of a funeral bell. I loathe that word and am afraid of it: I find it cold and heavy, like a hammer for smashing people's hopes. And now it made me stay my steps.

"What do you want of me?" I cried in pain and exasperation.

"Sit down," he said with another little laugh, taking my hand and pulling me down.

At that moment we were in an alley of the town park, with the bare ice-coated branches of acacias and lilacs all around. They hung over my head in the light of the moon, and it seemed to me that these brittle branches, armoured in ice, pierced my breast and reached my heart.

I looked at my companion without a word, puzzled and perplexed by his behaviour.

"He is mentally unbalanced," thought I, consoling myself with this explanation of his behaviour.

"Perhaps you think I'm touched," he said, as if he had read my thoughts. "Drop the thought. It is harmful and unworthy of you. How often do we use this as an excuse for not trying to understand anyone who is dif-

ferent from us, and how well it supports and elaborates the sad indifference one man feels for another."

"Oh, yes," I said, my vexation stronger than ever. "But excuse me, I must go. It is time."

"Go," he said with a shrug of his shoulders. "Go, but know that you are running away from yourself." He released my hand, and I walked away.

He stayed on in the park, on the embankment overlooking the Volga which now wore a coverlet of snow interlaced with dark ribbons of roads. In front of him stretched the vast plains of the far bank, silent and dreary. He stayed on, sitting on one of the benches and gazing out over the empty plain, while I walked on down the alley despite a presentiment that I could not leave him. And as I walked I thought: would it be better to slow or quicken my steps to show him—that man sitting there on the bench—how little I care for him?

I heard him softly whistling a familiar tune. It was a sad and amusing song about a blind man who undertook to guide the blind.

I wondered why he should have chosen precisely that song.

Suddenly I realized that from the moment of meeting this little man I had stepped inside a dark circle of strange and exceptional experiences. The calm felicity my spirit had enjoyed so recently had become wrapped in mists of foreboding. It was as if something sombre and important were about to happen.

I recalled the words of the song he was whistling:

How can you show us the way
When you yourself go astray?

I turned round and looked at him. With one elbow on his knee and his chin in his hand he was gazing at me as he whistled, and on his face, luminous in the moonlight, I could see the little black moustache twitching. A sense of fatality made me decide to go back. I went quickly and sat down beside him.

"Look, if we are to talk, let it be simply," I said vehemently, but without losing my composure.

"People should always talk simply," he nodded.

"I am aware that you wield a strange influence over me, and apparently there is something you want to tell me. Am I right?"

"At last you have found the courage to listen," he exclaimed with a laugh. But this time his laugh was not harsh, and I even thought I detected a note of joy in it.

"Speak then," I said, "but without your odd mannerisms, if you can."

"Oh, gladly," he said. "But you must agree that those mannerisms had to be resorted to as a means of attracting your attention. These days the simple and the lucid are ignored as being too cold and hard; yet we are unable to lend warmth or softness to anything for we ourselves are cold and hard. We long to indulge in pretty fancies and day-dreams and to be quaint and different, for the life of our creating is dull, colourless and boring. Life, which we were once so passionately set on changing, has crushed and broken us. Well, then, what are we to do? Let us see—perhaps the imagination can help man to rise above this world, if only for a brief space, and survey his lost place in it. For he has lost his place in it, hasn't he? He is

no longer lord of the earth, but a mere slave. He worships facts of his own creating, draws conclusions from them and then says to himself: behold immutable law! And in submitting to this law he is unaware that he has raised a barrier preventing him from freely changing life; hindering him in his struggle for the right to tear down in order to build up. And indeed he no longer even struggles; he simply adjusts himself to circumstances. Why should he struggle? Where are the ideals for whose sake he is willing to perform feats of valour? And so life has become dull and uninteresting. And so the creative spirit has died out in man. There are those who blindly search for something that will set their minds soaring and thus restore their faith in themselves. But often they wander away from the place where God dwells and the eternal verities uniting all mankind are hidden. Those who wander off the path of truth are doomed to perish. Let them! Do not interfere, nor waste your pity on them—there are lots of others in this world. The important thing is the longing to find God, and as long as there are souls which yearn after God, He

will manifest Himself unto them and abide with them, for what is He but the eternal striving after perfection? Am I right?"

"Yes," I said, "you are right."

"You are very quick to acquiesce," observed my interlocutor with his biting laugh. Then he grew silent and gazed off into space. He was silent so long that I sighed with impatience. At that he said, his eyes still wandering in space:

"Who is your god?"

Until then he had spoken softly and gently and it had been pleasant to listen to him. Like all people given to reflection, he was a bit sad; I was drawn to him, I understood him, and my exasperation vanished. But why should he have come out with this fatal question which any man of our times who is honest with himself would find difficulty in answering? Who was my god? If only I knew!

I was overwhelmed, and indeed who in my place could have preserved his equanimity? Now he turned his sharp eyes upon me and smiled as he awaited my answer.

"It would not take you so long to answer if you had an answer to give. Perhaps you

can make a reply if I put it this way: you are a writer, and thousands of people read what you write. What do you preach? And have you ever questioned your right to teach others?"

For the first time in my life I scrutinized my own soul. Let no one think I am exalting or humbling myself for the sake of attracting people's attention—one does not beg of beggars. I discovered that I was not without generous sentiments and aspirations, not without my share of qualities commonly called good, but they were not linked together by some dominating emotion, some lucid harmonious conception embracing all the phenomena of life. There was a great deal of hate in my heart; it smouldered there all the time and upon occasion broke out into bright flames of wrath. But there was even more doubt. At times it so paralyzed my mind, so devastated my soul that for long periods I dragged out an empty existence. Nothing could awaken me to an interest in life; my heart was as cold as death, my mind torpid, my imagination a prey to nightmares. Thus for long days and nights I lived on—deaf, dumb and blind—wanting

nothing, understanding nothing. And it seemed as if I were already a corpse and remained unburied only because of some inexplicable misunderstanding. The horror of such an existence was augmented by the realization that I must go on living, for death was even more dark, even more meaningless. No doubt it even robbed a man of the joy of hating.

Well, then, what did I preach—I, such as I was? What had I to say to people? The same things that had been said for ages and are always said and always listened to, but without changing man for the better? And had I a right to preach these ideas and precepts when I myself, brought up on them, often failed to do as they taught? And if I went against them, did that not mean that my belief in their truth was not a sincere belief, rooted in the very foundations of my ego? What was I to say to this man sitting next to me?

But he, tired of waiting for my answer, began to talk again:

"I would not put these questions to you if I did not see that ambition has not yet destroyed your sense of honour. You have the courage to listen to me, and from that I conclude

that your self-love is rational, for so anxious are you to increase it that you do not even flee from torment. And therefore I shall moderate the charges made against you and henceforth address you as one who is not blameless, yet cannot be called a criminal.

"There was a time when on this earth lived great masters of the written word, students of life and the human heart, men inspired by an all-compelling desire to improve the world, as well as by a profound faith in human nature. They wrote books which shall never fall into oblivion, for immortal truths are printed therein and incorruptible beauty emanates from their pages. The characters drawn in these books are true to life, for they are animated by the breath of inspiration. There is courage in these books, and flaming wrath, and love which is free and sincere, and they contain not a single superfluous word. It is from these books, I know, that you have drawn nourishment for your soul. And yet your soul must have badly digested it, for what you write of truth and love sounds false and insincere, as if the words were forced out of you. Like the moon, you reflect another's

light, and this light is sadly sombre; it throws many shadows but gives little illumination and no warmth at all. You yourself are too poor to offer others anything of real value, and when you do give, it is not for the supreme satisfaction of knowing you have enriched life by adding to its store of beautiful thoughts and words, but rather to elevate the chance fact of your existence to the level of essential phenomena. You give merely that you may take more from life and people. You are too poor to present gifts; you are a usurer, lending out bits of experience for the sake of the interest you will be paid in fame. Your pen scratches feebly at the surface of things, pokes ineffectively among life's trifling circumstances; as you describe the commonplace feelings of commonplace people, you perhaps teach them many insignificant truths, but are you able to create even the smallest deception capable of elevating the human spirit? No! Are you sure it is so important to rake through the garbage of the commonplace where one finds nothing but dismal crumbs of truth going to prove that man is evil, stupid, and without honour, that he is complete-

ly and forever dependent on external circumstances, that he is weak and pitiable and utterly alone? If you ask me, they have already succeeded in convincing him that this is so, for just see how dull his mind has grown and how unresponsive his spirit! And that is not strange. He sees himself as represented in books—and books, particularly if they are written with that glibness which is often taken for talent—cast a certain hypnotic spell over their readers. Observing himself as you have presented him, he sees his own ugliness but fails to see any possibility of improvement. Are you able to point out this possibility? How can you, when you yourself—but I shall spare your feelings because I see you are listening without trying to contradict me or justify yourself. That is good, for a teacher, if he is honest, will always be an attentive pupil. Nowadays all you teachers take much more from people than you give them, for you speak only of their shortcomings, see nothing but them. But surely a person has virtues as well; do you yourselves not have them? You? Pooh! In what way do you differ from the colourless people whom you portray so

critically, so cruelly? You look upon yourselves as prophets called upon to expose vice that virtue may triumph, but in your efforts to distinguish vice from virtue, have you not observed that the two are entangled like two balls of yarn, one black, one white, and that, being entangled, they have become grey, each having been influenced by the colouring of the other? And I seriously doubt that God has sent you as His prophet. He would have chosen stronger men than you. And He would have fired their hearts with an impassioned love of life and truth and people, so that they would shine forth in the darkness like torches proclaiming His strength and glory. You smoke like the brands of Satan's power, and this smoke seeps into the minds and hearts of men, filling them with lack of faith in themselves. Tell me this: what do you teach?"

I felt his hot breath upon my cheek and averted my eyes, afraid to meet his. His words seared my brain like fire. I was awe-struck by the realization of how hard it was to answer his simple questions. And I did not answer them.

"And so I, a conscientious reader of all that is written by you and others of your kind, ask you: why do you write? You happen to have written a lot. Is it to rouse noble sentiments in people's hearts? You will never do it with your cold, jejune words. Not only are you unable to contribute anything new to life; you present the old in a rumpled-crumpled form lacking clear images. Your works teach nothing and make the reader ashamed of nothing but you. Everything in them is commonplace: commonplace people, commonplace thoughts, commonplace happenings. When will people begin to speak of the revolt of the spirit and the need of the soul's renascence? Where is the challenge to creative living, where are the lessons of valour, where the words of encouragement giving wings to the soul?

"Perhaps you will say: life presents no patterns but those we present. Speak not thus, for it is a shame and a disgrace that one blessed with the power to write should acknowledge his impotence in the face of life and his inability to rise above it. If you stand on the same level as life, if your imagination is

incapable of creating patterns that do not exist in life but are essential to its improvement, what is the good of your work and what is the justification of your calling? As you clutter up people's intellects with your photographic facsimiles of their uneventful lives, ask yourself if you are not doing harm? For—come now, confess it!—you do not know how to present a picture of life capable of evoking a vindictive sense of shame and a burning desire to create new forms of existence! Do you know how to quicken the pulse of life and infuse energy into it, as others have done?"

My strange interlocutor paused, and I pondered his words without speaking.

"All about me I see many who are astute, but few who are noble, and those few have sick and broken souls. And for some reason my observations always lead me to the same conclusion: the better a man is and the more honest and unsullied his soul, the less his store of energy, the sicklier his soul, and the harder his life. Such people are fated to be lonely and miserable. But though they yearn with all their hearts for something better,

they lack the strength to create it. Is it not possible that they are so crushed and impotent simply because at the right moment no one spoke a needed word of encouragement to them?"

"And another thing," went on my strange companion; "can you call forth the joyful laughter that purifies the soul? Just see, people have completely forgotten how to laugh in the right way. They laugh maliciously, they laugh basely, they often laugh through their tears, but they never laugh with the whole-hearted merriment that should shake the sides of grown people, for a good laugh is a wholesome thing. It is essential that human beings laugh—after all, this ability is one of the few things that distinguish men from animals. Can you call forth any laughter but that of censure, cheap laughter at the expense of human beings who are funny only because they are pitiable? Try to understand that your right to preach must spring from an ability to awaken sincere sentiments which, like hammers, must knock down and destroy old confining forms of life so that roomier ones may be built up. Wrath, hate, courage, shame, disgust, and, in the end, enraged

despair—these are levers by means of which anything on earth can be destroyed. Can you produce such levers? And can you put them to work? You must nurture in your breast a great hatred of human shortcomings or a great love for the common man—a love born of his sufferings—if you would have the right to address the people. If you feel neither the one nor the other, be humble and consider well before you speak."

It was getting light by this time, but the gloom in my heart deepened. And this man, who knew all the secrets of my soul, kept on talking. From time to time I was struck by the thought: is he a man at all?

But I was too taken up by what he said to consider the question. Once more his words pricked my brain like needles:

"In spite of everything life is growing broader and deeper, albeit this growth is a slow one because you have neither the strength nor the knowledge to accelerate it. Life is growing, and day by day people are becoming more inquiring. Who is to answer their questions? You are the ones who ought to, you self-appointed apostles. But do you know

life well enough to explain it to others? Do you know what the demands of the times are, have you knowledge of the future, and can you speak revivifying words to one who, corrupted by the baseness of life, has lost heart? He has lost heart, he has no zest for life, he no longer wants to live decently, but would live simply, like a pig, and—do you hear?—he smiles mockingly whenever anyone utters the word 'the ideal.' He has degenerated into a heap of bones covered by flesh and a thick skin, and this heap of bones is animated not by the spirit, but by lust. He is desperately in need of your attention. Hurry! Teach him how to live while he still bears human semblance! But how can you be expected to revive in him a zest for life when you do nothing but mumble and grumble and complain, or paint an impassive picture of his deterioration? The odour of decay hangs over the earth; cowardice and servility have seeped into men's hearts; laziness has bound their minds and hands with soft fetters. . . . And what do you bring to this loathsome muddle? How shallow, how insignificant you are, and how many there are of you!

Oh, if only a stern but loving soul with a heart of flame and a great all-encompassing mind would appear! Then prophetic words would come ringing through the shameful silence like the striking of a bell, and then perhaps a shudder would pass over the despicable souls of the living dead. . . ."

So saying, he became silent. I did not look at him. I cannot recall which feeling prevailed in me—shame or terror.

"What have you to say to me?" came his unconcerned query.

"Nothing," I replied.

And again there was silence.

"How will you go on living?"

"I don't know," I replied.

"What will you write?"

I was silent.

"Silence is the highest wisdom."

A nerve-racking pause separated these words from the laugh that followed. He laughed delightedly, like a person who has long waited for a chance to laugh with such ease and enjoyment. And my heart laughed blood to hear this accursed laughter.

"Heh, heh! And this from you, who would

teach others to live? You, who are so easily disconcerted? Now, I warrant, you are aware of who I am, eh? Heh, heh, heh! And all the rest of the youths who are born old men would be just as disconcerted if they had dealings with me. Only one who dons the armour of lies, audacity and shamelessness does not wince to hear the judgement passed on him by his conscience. So that is how strong you are: one push and over you go! Speak one word—only one word in your defence; deny the truth of what I have said; relieve your heart of its pain and its shame; be strong and self-confident if but for a moment, and I will take back all that I have said. I will bow before you. Show me the least attribute of your soul that gives you the right to be called teacher. I need to be taught, for I am but a man. I have become lost in this dark maze of life and am searching for a path that will lead me out to the light, to truth, to beauty, and a new form of life. Show me the way. I am a man. Hate me, flog me, but rescue me from this slough of indifference. I long to be better than I am, but how can I achieve it? Teach me how."

And I thought: can I do it? Can I satisfy the demands which this man justly places upon me? Life's fires are dying out, shadows of doubt are gathering more and more thickly about the minds of men, and some way out must be found. What is this way? One thing I know: it is not after happiness the soul must yearn. Of what value is happiness? Not in happiness lies the meaning of life, nor will self-complacency satisfy man for long—he is, after all, above that. The meaning of life lies in the beauty and strength of his striving toward some goal, and it is essential that every moment of existence has its high purpose. And this is possible. But not in the old framework of life, which cramps the soul and robs it of freedom.

Once more my companion laughed, but quietly this time—the laugh of a man whose heart is being eaten out by thought.

"How many people this planet has brought forth, yet how few monuments there are to great men! Why should that be so? In the past —but a fig for the past! It only fills us with envy, for in the present there is no one who will leave the least trace of himself on this

earth after he is dead. Man is slumbering, and there is nobody to wake him up. He is slumbering and reverting to the beast. He needs the lash, and after the lash—the impulsive caresses of love. Do not fear to hurt him. If, loving him, you flog him, he will understand and accept his stripes as well-earned. And when he has suffered and is ashamed, lavish on him your caresses and he will be reborn. People are mere children, even though at times we are shocked by the viciousness of their actions and the perversion of their minds. They are always in need of love and of fresh and wholesome spiritual food. Are you capable of loving people?"

"Loving people?" I repeated dubiously, for indeed I did not know whether I loved people or not. In all sincerity, I did not know. Who would say of himself: "Behold, here is one who loves people!" Anyone who follows his own behaviour attentively will think long before he dares to say: "I love." We all know what a gulf separates each man from his neighbour.

"You do not answer? It makes no difference—I understand you. I am going now."

"So soon?" I asked faintly, for however afraid of him I was, I was even more afraid of myself.

"Yes, I am going. But I shall come back. Wait for me."

And he went.

Did he really? I did not notice his going. He vanished as swiftly and silently as a shadow. I went on sitting there in the park for a long time, unconscious of the cold, unaware that the sun had risen and was gleaming on the ice-covered branches of the trees. And it seemed strange to behold that bright day, with the sun shining as impersonally as ever and the old long-suffering earth clad in a coverlet of snow that sparkled blindingly in the rays of the sun. . . .

1895-98

THE POET

A Sketch

Shura came home from the gymnasium, took off her coat and went into the dining-room. She noticed something unusual in the way mother, who was already sitting at the laid table, smiled at her. This circumstance immediately awakened Shura's curiosity, but she was a big girl and considered it undignified to display curiosity by asking questions. She kissed mamma on the forehead, and, throwing a glance at herself in the mirror, took her seat. Once again something unusual struck her—the table was laid "full dress," and for five persons. Then it wasn't anything more than someone being invited to dinner. Shura sighed with disappointment. She knew

all of papa's and mamma's and Aunt Zina's acquaintances. There wasn't a single interesting person among them. Heavens! How boring they all were, and how boring everything was!

"Who's that for?" she asked indifferently, nodding her head at the extra cover.

Before answering, her mother looked at her watch, then at the clock, then turned towards the window and listened to something, and at last said with a smile:

"Guess."

"No fun," said Shura, conscious that her curiosity was flaring up again. She remembered that Lyuba, the housemaid, on opening the door to her, had also said somewhat unusually:

"I'm so glad you've come, Miss!"

Lyuba rarely said she was glad she had come, and never with such emphasis. Shura knew this very well, for the slightest new detail in the dull routine of family life produced a marked ripple on its quiet surface and registered firmly in Shura's little head, so thirsting for impressions.

"But perhaps it will be fun. Do make a try," her mother proposed again.

Having deliberated Lyuba's intonation, Shura was certain that it would be fun, lots of fun. But somehow she was reluctant to ask outright.

"Someone come from somewhere?" she said, feigning indifference.

"Of course," nodded mother, "but who?"

"Uncle Zhenya," Shura ventured, feeling crimson flow over her cheeks.

"No, not a relative. But it's someone you're mad on."

Shura made round eyes. Then she suddenly leaped up and threw herself on mamma's neck:

"Mummy! Really?"

"Stop it, stop it!" Mother was laughing and pushing her away. "You giddy child! Wait till I tell him all this!"

"Mummy! Krymsky? Has he come? And has papa gone to meet him? And Aunt Zina? They'll be here any minute. . . . Mummy, I'll put on my grey dress! Oh, they're coming! They're here!"

Excited and blushing, she jumped around mother's chair, then rushed to the mirror, was about to run off to change, but hearing

the front-door shut downstairs, she returned to the mirror, patted her hair, sat down sedately at the table and closed her eyes, to suppress her excitement. When she opened them Krymsky would be in the room, close to her, only a chair away. The poet whose verses she read over and over, and whom the whole gymnasium took to be the best poet of all the moderns! He wrote such gentle, caressing lines, so sonorous, so sad. Heavens! And he'd be here in the flesh, and he'd be close to her, talk to her, read verses which the girls at the gymnasium couldn't possibly know yet! Tomorrow she'd say to them: "You ought to hear what Krymsky has written!" "What?" they'd ask, and she'd recite the new verse, and they'd ask her where they could find it, and she'd say nonchalantly—oh, so nonchalantly!—she'd say it hadn't been published yet, that Krymsky had read it to her at their dinner table the day before!

What astonishment there would be, what envy! That shrew Kikina—she'd have a fit! That would teach her what was better—to have a singer for a sister, or a poet for an acquaintance! And all the others. They'd keep

asking her: "Shura, show him to us." And—and what if he suddenly fell in love with her? That was quite possible. Because he was a poet. Poets always fell in love all at once. Heavens! What kind of a moustache would he have? And his eyes? Large and sad, no doubt, with dark circles under them. And an aquiline nose. The moustache would be black. "Shura," he would say, twisting his hands and dropping to his knees before her, "Shura! As soon as I saw you, 'the dawn of a new life burst upon me, and my heart trembled with hope. . . . You are the one. This I swear —for my soul has recognized you.'" Oh, but he had already written these lines. Then. . . .

"The stuffiness, the dust. Some ghastly smells—I couldn't get to sleep all night."

The voice which brought Shura back to reality from the dreamland of poesy and fancy was very soft and attractive, though there sounded in it the harsh and peevish notes of a pampered man. Shura opened her eyes and got up as a tall thin man in a black velvet jacket and wide grey trousers came towards her.

"Good day, young lady. You've forgotten me, haven't you? Why, of course."

"I—" Shura was confused, "I always read your verses, but I was a little girl when you were here last."

"And now you're a big girl," smiled the poet, measuring her with a glance; he wanted to add something, but only pulled in his lips, as old men do, and sank into a chair, addressing Shura's father:

"It's a cosy place you have here, Mikhail."

Dropping her head, Shura gazed into her plate and saw the poet's likeness on its smooth surface. She did not like his grey trousers, the cropped head, and the thin red moustache—oh, all of it was extremely prosaic!

And his bluish shaven cheeks, and his chin, and his habit of pulling in his lips. His eyes were very light—one might say colourless eyes—and they had bags under them, and his forehead was wrinkled. In fact, he was just like a clerk she had seen at the post-office. There was nothing, nothing at all poetic in his appearance. His hands? Shura glanced at them sideways. They were plump, with short, thick fingers. On one finger he wore a ring set with an agate. Shura sighed, feeling very miserable.

"So you read my verses?"

He was saying this to her. She nodded and blushed.

"Well, and—may I ask—do you like them?"

"Oh, they're all crazy about your verses," said mother.

"Ah! That's flattering."

"Not at all, it isn't true," Shura contradicted her mother, but her words came after the poet's.

The girl was embarrassed—it was stupid of her. Mother, father, aunt, and he—they were all laughing. He even raised his eyebrows for some reason, and his face took on a clownish look. Why did he raise his eyebrows? And why did he laugh with the others? He was a poet, and should be sensitive and tactful. Should her embarrassment seem funny to him, as it did to the others? Was he like everybody else? Perhaps he was just trying to be polite, and later he would be his own self.

"What class are you in, Shura?"

"The sixth."

Why did he want to know? And why did he call her Shura?

"And which teacher do you like best? The drawing teacher, I suppose?"

"No, literature."

"Oh, yes, the teacher of literature." Deafening laughter followed.

It seemed to Shura she was being torn to pieces, pinched, that thousands of pins were being thrust into her body. She wanted to leave the table and escape. She felt cold, and she feared she would not be able to hold back the tears. How could she have given herself away like that? Trembling with indignation, she looked into the poet's face, an angry and nervous sparkle in her eyes. She was afraid her courage would fail before she had said all the things teeming in her brain, and so she began speaking breathlessly, crushing her fingers under the table:

"Does it seem funny to you? But it isn't funny at all. He's the best teacher we have, and we love him very much. He speaks so interestingly—reads to us—all sorts of books—points out the new in literature, and, on the whole, he's a very good man. Ask anybody you like, from our class, or the seventh. Why are you laughing? Of course, I. . . ."

"Shura! What's the matter with you?" exclaimed her father.

"We have offended the young lady," Krymsky said gently, "I apologize."

His apology grated on Shura's ears. It seemed to her they were insincere, and that he wasn't in the least interested in how she would accept his words. Moreover, she felt like a stranger here, and not needed by any of these people. She was sorry for herself, and sat through the dinner in a fog, concentrating on the sadness gathering in her heart, a quiet, gnawing sadness.

"So that's what he's like, the poet! The same as everybody else," she kept thinking after dinner as she sat at the window in her room looking at her favourite lilac bushes in the garden—looking at them fixedly, as if seeing them for the first time.

"Like everybody else. But why, then, doesn't papa write poetry? Is he any worse than this poet?" Some of the poet's lines came to her mind—so wistful, so stirring—and rhymed phrases full of sorrowful tenderness. "He never mentioned them during dinner. He must have grown used to writing them,

as Sonya Sazikova has grown used to making her wonderful paper-flowers. Everyone envies her, but she only laughs and says: 'Oh, it's very simple!'"

A sound of voices came from the garden: it was father and Krymsky. If they sat down on the bench behind the lilac she would hear every word they said. Stretching her neck, Shura looked out to see where they would go.

"How is your latest book selling?" father was asking.

"Not bad. I'm thinking of a second edition. But people are buying it more out of curiosity than from a love of poetry. As soon as the book appeared, the wretched critics set up a cry: Decadence! The public wants to know what decadence means, of which so much is being said, all of it quite incomprehensible. It's all to my advantage. They buy the book just to have a look at decadence."

Krymsky's voice was sadly derisive, yet resentment sounded in his words, and this note called forth a kindred echo in the heart of the girl at the window.

"Yes," said papa, "the critics are severe with you writers."

"They demand that the poet voice the vengeance and lamentation of a citizen. Snug in their nests, they think people want vengeance and lamentation. Ridiculous. There aren't any citizens in our life. There are only stupid and self-satisfied people, and people who are worn out and dissatisfied. Nothing more. This sad circumstance is unknown to the gentlemen who are our critics. They have to do with books, not with life; with old traditions, not with new ideas. The young people? 'Young people, my friend, are born old nowadays,' someone has aptly said. They haven't much use for poetry, nor for anything else that could purify the soul. However, let's drop this boring subject. . . . What a pretty daughter you have!"

"Ever the poet! You've taken note of that already?"

"Bless his heart!" whispered Shura, blushing with pleasure. She concluded from his words that he wasn't understood and was complaining about it. Once more he had become a poet in her eyes. And then this unexpected praise!

"By the way, pardon my indiscretion, but—"

"What about that wife of mine? I don't know where she is. About two years ago I heard she was teaching school somewhere in the Caucasus. Ugh! Can't think of her without a shudder. There are women whose virtue and naiveté inspire nothing but terror—an unfeigned terror in me, miserable sinner that I am. That's the sort of woman my wife is. Never have I felt more sorry for myself than I did when I discovered what she was. A Christian who just must suffer at any cost. Very boring. I say, will they serve us tea soon?"

"Very soon. But what I wanted to ask you was: what are you now—married, or single?"

"Single. Since May. All winter I lived with an angel. An extraordinary affair, old fellow! She was an admirer of my talent, a fiery little thing, and not without education, which, by the way, didn't prevent her from being a perfect imbecile. We came together quite by accident—at least on my part there was nothing premeditated. It happened at a picnic—I'd had a bit to drink. The devil knows how she came to be at my flat. I woke up in the morning and rubbed my eyes: Mar-

ried! I congratulated myself, dressed and waited for what would happen next."

Father was laughing loudly, and it seemed to Shura that the sound of his laughter split something within her. It hurt terribly.

"The deuce, you say. What then?"

"Well, she woke up. Tears followed; a million kisses and just as many vows. We had a week of arrant abandon which pretty well wore me out."

"What about her parents?"

"She concealed it from them. Then, little by little, life began stepping into its rights, and it all started, the devil knows what. First of all she tried to prove to me that my tender, wonderful, enchanting verses didn't harmonize with my dressing-gown—something I had paid sixty-five rubles for. I protested, she wept. A scene. And then it turns out that a poet is a creature so celestial in her conception that in his flat there should not exist premises, which by dint of physiological laws, even a poet must visit sometimes. Oh, the devil take this idiotic upbringing that addles the brains of our women! Quarrels, tears, allusions to motherhood, a demand to

concede on all points. I escaped and wrote to her in prose: 'A poet needs freedom above all else'."

"Well, and then what?" father asked slowly.

"I'm paying her twenty-five rubles a month."

Shura felt cold and was seized with a nervous chill but she went on staring wide-eyed out of the window.

"So that's why your poetry has been so pessimistic of late!"

"Have you read 'A motley crowd of memories keeps milling in the darkness of the night'?"

"Well?"

"In it I describe my sensations—the hangover of this stupid story."

"It is well described," sighed father. "You always were a master at portraying 'the vague tracery of the heart's emotions'."

"But I see you really do read me!"

"Very much so. All flattery aside, your verse is delightful."

"Thanks. It isn't often I hear that, although, to be frank, I know I deserve the praise."

"Doubtlessly, old fellow! Let's go and have tea."

"Just look at who writes nowadays, and how they write! Vultures, not poets. They torture the language, they mutilate it. I cherish it and try to—"

Shura watched them go through the garden side by side, father's arm round the poet's waist. Their voices grew indistinct, vanished.

Shura straightened herself slowly, as though something heavy were pressing her down and it was difficult to move.

"Shura, come and have your tea!" called mother.

She got up and started for the door. Passing the mirror she saw that her face was pale, drawn, and frightened. A mist veiled her eyes, and when she entered the dining-room the familiar faces appeared like shapeless white blots.

"I hope the young lady isn't angry with me any more?" came the poet's voice.

She said nothing, gazing at his cropped head and trying to recall what he, this man, had seemed like to her when she had read his poetry and didn't know him.

"Shura, why don't you answer? How very impolite!" exclaimed father.

"What do you want of me?" she cried out, jumping up. "Leave me alone! Fakers!"

Sobbing, she rushed out of the dining-room.

"Fakers!" she repeated hysterically.

For several moments the four people at the table sat without speaking, looking at each other in astonishment. Then mother and aunt went out.

"Could she have overheard our conversation?" father asked the poet.

"Damn it all!" the latter ejaculated in embarrassment, fidgeting about on his chair.

Mother came back.

"She's crying," she said with a shrug of her shoulders in reply to the questioning looks directed at her.

1896

KONOVALOV

As I was glancing through the paper I came upon the name of Konovalov; it instantly caught my attention, and this is what I read:

"Last night in cell 3 of the local jail, a man from Murom named Alexander Ivanovich Konovalov, aged 40, hanged himself from the damper-knob of the chimney. The suicide had been arrested in Pskov for vagrancy and was being returned to his native town. The prison authorities assert that he was a quiet, peaceable, contemplative man. His suicide, according to the report of the prison doctor, is to be attributed to melancholia."

As I read this brief notice, I felt that I could throw more light on the reasons inducing

this quiet contemplative man to put an end to his life. I knew him. Perhaps it was my duty to speak: he was a splendid chap, and one does not meet such people too often in this world.

. . . I was eighteen when I made the acquaintance of Konovalov. At that time I worked in a bakery as the baker's assistant. The baker was a soldier from the "music squad," a prodigious drinker who often spoiled the dough. When drunk he would play tunes on his lips or drum them out with his fingers on anything that came to hand. If the owner of the bakery flew at him for spoiling the bread or not having it ready by morning, he would become furious, would curse the owner roundly and try to make him realize it was a *musician* he was dealing with.

"Spoiled the dough!" he would shout, his long red moustache bristling, his thick wet lips slapping together loudly. "Burnt the crust! Soggy! To hell with you, you cross-eyed hyena! Do you think I was born for such work? To hell with you and your work! I'm a musician, I'll have you know. It used to be if the viola got drunk, I played the viola; if

the oboe was arrested, I played the oboe; if the cornet got sick, who took his place? Me! Tum-tarra-tum-tum! Bah, you miserable *katsap*! I'm quitting!"

And the owner, a puffy, underdone man with short fat legs, a womanish face, and eyes of different colours, would stamp his feet till his belly shook and shriek:

"You thief! You murderer! You Christ-selling Judas!" And he would raise his hands over his head with the stubby fingers spread wide apart and shriek even louder: "And what if I turn you over to the police as a rebel?"

"Me, the servant of the tsar and the country, turned over to the police?" the soldier would bawl back, and then he would advance slowly on the owner, brandishing his fists. The owner would back away snorting and spitting in rage; there was nothing else for him to do—good bakers were not to be found in that Volga town in summer.

Such scenes took place almost daily. The soldier drank, spoiled the dough, and played marches and waltzes—"numbers," as he called them; the boss grit his teeth, while I,

as a result of all this, had to do the work of two.

And so I was very glad when the following scene took place between the owner and the soldier:

"Well, soldier," said the boss as he came into the bakery, his face beaming, a look of triumph in his eyes, "Well, soldier, poke out your lips and sing a march."

"What's that?" said the soldier glumly from where he lay on the bin drunk as usual.

"Get ready to set out on a march," exulted the owner.

"Where to?" asked the soldier, dropping his legs over the edge of the bench and sensing something wrong.

"Wherever you like."

"What d'ye mean?" barked the soldier.

"I mean I'm not keeping you any longer. Take your pay and—forward, march! To the four corners of the earth."

The soldier, who was used to bullying the boss because he was sure he could not do without him, was sobered by this announcement; he knew only too well that it would be hard

for one with his poor knowledge of the trade to find another job.

"Come now, you're fooling," he said anxiously, struggling to his feet.

"Get along, get along."

"Get along?"

"Clear out."

"Worked out, eh?" said the soldier, with a bitter shake of his head. "You've sucked my blood—sucked me dry—and now you throw me out. Slick of you, you spider."

"Me, a spider?" seethed the boss.

"Yes, you. A blood-sucking spider, that's what you are," said the soldier definitely, and went staggering towards the door.

The boss gave a nasty laugh as he watched him go, and there was a gay sparkle in his eyes.

"Try and find somebody who'll hire you now! Nobody'll take you as a gift after what I've told them about you. Not a soul."

"Have you found a new baker?" I asked.

"The new one's an old one. He was my helper once. What a man! Worth his weight in gold. But he's a drunk, too, tut-tut! Only he goes off on bouts. He'll work like an ox

for three or four months; won't sleep or rest or give a hang for the pay. Just work and sing. And when he sings it goes straight to your heart. When he's had his fill of singing he'll go off on the booze."

The owner sighed and gave a hopeless wave of his hand.

"Wild horses can't stop him once he's started. He drinks till he's sick or stark naked. And then, maybe because he's ashamed, he slinks off somewhere like an evil spirit that's caught a whiff of incense. But here he is. Have you come for good, Sasha?"

"For good," came a deep rich voice from the door-way.

There with his shoulder against the jamb stood a tall broad-shouldered man of about thirty. His clothes were those of a typical tramp, his face that of a true Slav. He was wearing a red calico shirt that was torn and indescribably dirty, wide trousers of coarse linen, on one foot he had the remains of a rubber galosh, on the other a battered leather shoe. His fair hair was tousled and bits of straw were entangled in it. They were in his fair beard, too, which spread like a fan over

his chest. His pale, worn, longish face was lighted by a pair of large blue eyes with a gentle look in them. His lips—fine, but lacking colour—smiled from underneath a blond moustache. His smile was such that he seemed to be saying apologetically:

"I'm just what I am; don't be too hard on me."

"Come in, Sasha, this is your helper," said the boss, rubbing his hands together as he gazed admiringly at the powerful physique of the new baker, who advanced without a word and held out an enormous hand. We exchanged greetings. He sat down on a bench, stretched out his legs, stared at his feet, and said to the owner:

"Buy me two shirts, Vassili Semyonovich, and some shoes. And some linen for a cap."

"You'll have everything, don't worry. I've got caps, and I'll bring the shirts and trousers this evening. Meanwhile, get to work; I know what a good fellow you are, and you'll have no reason to complain of me. Nobody could treat Konovalov bad because he never treats anybody bad himself. I've got a heart, even if I am your boss. I used to work once

myself, and I know horse-radish draws tears. Well, get together, fellows, I'll be leaving you."

And he left us alone.

Konovalov sat there without a word, looking about him with a smile on his face.

The bakery was in a basement with a vaulted ceiling, and its three windows were below street level. There was little light and little air, but plenty of dirt, dampness, and flour dust. Three big bins stood against the wall, one of them empty, another with ready dough in it, the third with dough that was being leavened. Across each of them fell a pale shaft of light from the window. Sacks of flour lay on the dirty floor beside a stove that took up nearly one-third of the room; big logs burned furiously in the stove, and the reflection of the flames flickering on the grey walls gave the impression that they were noiselessly chattering together.

It was depressing to have that sooty vaulted ceiling hanging over our heads. The fusion of daylight with the light from the stove produced a vague illumination that tired the eyes. Dust and street-sounds came pouring

in a steady stream through the windows. Konovalov took all this in, heaved a sigh, and said in an expressionless voice:

"Been working here long?"

I told him. We both fell silent and gazed at each other from under bent brows.

"A regular prison," he said. "Let's go outside and sit on the bench by the gate, shall we?"

We did.

"A fellow can breathe out here. It'll take me some time to get used to that hole. I've just come from the sea, so you can judge for yourself. Worked on the Caspian. And all of a sudden to find yourself slapped down into a hole in the ground!"

He gave me a rueful smile and stopped talking, gazing hard at the people walking and riding past. There was a sad light in his clear blue eyes. Evening fell; the street was noisy, stuffy, dusty; the shadows of the houses crept across the road. Konovalov sat leaning against the wall, his arms crossed on his chest, his fingers playing with his silky beard. I stole a glance at his pale oval face and thought: I wonder what he's like? But I did not

dare speak to him because he was my chief, and also because he inspired me with respect.

Three fine lines crossed his forehead, but from time to time they vanished, and I longed to know what this man was thinking about.

"Come along, it's time. You mix the second batch and I'll set the third."

When we had weighed out one lot of dough and mixed another, we sat down for a glass of tea. Konovalov thrust his hand into his shirt and said to me:

"Can you read? Here, read this," and he handed me a soiled and wrinkled piece of paper.

I read:

"Dear Sasha,

"Greetings and a kiss by mail. I'm lonely and unhappy and I can't wait for the day when I'll go off with you or begin living with you. I'm sick and tired of this rotten life, even if I did like it at first. You understand why, and I began to understand, too, after I met you. Please write to me soon, I want awfully to hear from you. Good-bye for the present

but not farewell, dear bearded friend of my heart. I won't scold you even if I am disappointed in you because you're a pig. You went away without even saying good-bye to me, but even so I was always happy with you and I never was with anybody else and I'll never forget it. Couldn't you try to have me taken off the list, Sasha? The girls told you I'd throw you over if I was off the list but that's all nonsense and an absolute lie. If you were only nice to me I'd be as faithful to you as a dog once I was off the list. You could do it easy but it's hard for me. When you came to see me I cried because I have to live such a life but I didn't tell you that was why.

"Good-bye,
"Your Capitolina."

Konovalov took the letter from me and began to turn it absently in one hand while he twisted his beard with the other.

"Do you know how to write?"

"I do."

"And have you any ink?"

"I have."

"Then write her a letter, will you? She probably thinks I'm a rotter—that I've forgotten all about her. Do write."

"I will, but who is she?"

"A prostitute. See, she's asking me to have her taken off the list. That means I'll have to promise the police to marry her; then they'll give her back her passport and take away her card and she'll be free, understand?"

In half an hour a touching missive was ready.

"Well, read it; how does it sound?" asked Konovalov impatiently.

This is how it sounded:

"Dear Capa,

"Don't think I'm low enough to have forgotten all about you. I didn't forget, but I went on a bout and drank up everything I had. But I'm working again, and tomorrow I'll get an advance from my boss and send it to Philip and he'll have you taken off the list. I'll send enough to pay your fare here. So long for the present.

"Yours,

"Alexander."

"Hm-m," said Konovalov, scratching his head, "not much of a writer, you aren't. No feeling in your letter, no tears. And besides, I asked you to bawl me out in strong language, and you haven't."

"Why should I?"

"To let her know I'm ashamed of myself and realize how bad I treated her. That's why. This is dry as split peas. Drop a tear or two."

There was nothing for it but to drop a tear or two, which I did effectively. Konovalov was satisfied. He put his hand on my shoulder and said enthusiastically:

"Now everything's fine. Thanks. I can see you're a good sort. You and I will get on together."

I had no doubt of this, and asked him to tell me about Capitolina.

"Capitolina? She's young—just a kid. From Vyatka. A merchant's daughter. She left the straight and narrow, and the further she went, the worse it got, and at last she landed in a brothel. When I first saw her I thought, God! how could it have happened? She's just a baby. We got to be good friends. She'd cry. I'd

say, 'Don't worry, have patience, I'll get you out of here, just wait a while.' And I got everything ready, money and everything, and then all of a sudden I went off on a bout and found myself in Astrakhan. And then here. A certain chap let her know where I was, and she wrote me that letter."

"What are you thinking of doing—marrying her?" I asked.

"Me get married? How can a drunk get married? Oh, no, I'll just have her taken off the list and then she'll be free to go wherever she likes. She'll find some place to fit into and maybe turn out to be a decent woman."

"She wants to live with you."

"She's just kidding. They're all like that, the women. I know them through and through; I've had lots of them. Even had a merchant's wife once. I was working as a groom in a circus when she laid eyes on me. 'Come and be our coachman,' she said. I was fed up with the circus, so I went. Well, one thing led to another. They had a big house, with horses and servants, and all the rest. Lived like lords. Her husband was short and fat, like our boss, but she was slim and graceful

as a cat, and a hot little parcel. She'd hug me tight and kiss me on the mouth, and her kisses were like hot coals. They made me tremble all over, and I was afraid of her. There she'd be, kissing me and sobbing so hard that her shoulders shook. 'What's the matter, Vera?' I'd say. 'You're like a child, Sasha, you don't understand a thing,' she'd answer. She was a sweet little woman, and it's the truth what she said, I really don't understand anything. I'm a blockhead and I know it. I don't understand why I do what I do, and I never give a thought to how I live."

He stopped speaking and gazed at me with wide-open eyes filled with an expression that was half fear, half wonder—some sense of alarm that heightened the sadness of his handsome face, making it still handsomer.

"And how did your affair with the merchant's wife end?" I asked.

"You see, every once in a while I feel so miserable I just can't bear to go on living. It's as if I was the only creature in the whole wide world, as if there wasn't another living thing but me anywhere on earth. And at

such times I hate everybody; myself and everyone else. I wouldn't give a damn if everybody died. It must be some sickness in me. That's what started me drinking. So I went to her and said, 'Let me go, Vera Mikhailovna, I can't stand it any longer.' 'Why, have you grown tired of me?' she asks and gives an unpleasant laugh. 'It's not you I've grown tired of, it's myself,' I said. At first she didn't understand and she began to shout and scold me. But when she came to understand, she just dropped her head and said, 'Go along, then.' And she cried. She had black eyes and her hair was black, too, and curly. She came from a family of clerks, not merchants. I felt sorry for her and hated myself. Of course it was hard for her to live with such a husband. He was like a sack of flour. She cried for a long time—she had got used to me by then. I was very tender to her: sometimes I'd take her up in my arms and rock her like a baby. She'd fall asleep and I'd sit and look at her. A person can look very pretty asleep—so sweet and simple; just breathes and smiles and nothing else. Sometimes we'd go for a drive, when we were living in the country

in the summer. She liked to drive like the wind. When we'd get to the woods we'd tie the horse to a tree and lie down on the chilly grass. She'd make me put my head in her lap while she read a book to me. I'd listen until I fell asleep. They were good stories she read, very good. I'll never forget one of them about a mute named Gerasim and his dog. This mute was an outcast, nobody loved him but his dog. When people made fun of him, he'd go off to find his dog. A very sad story. He was a serf, this Gerasim, and one day his mistress says to him, 'Go and drown your dog, Gerasim, it's always howling.' So off he went. He took a boat, put the dog in it, and pushed off. I'd start shivering whenever she got to that place. God, think of making a man kill a creature that was his only happiness! What sort of a thing was that to do? A wonderful story, and true to life—that's what made it so good. There are people like that: some one thing is the whole world to them. This dog, for instance. Why the dog? Because nobody else loved him, but the dog did, and a man can't live without love of some kind—why else was he given a heart

to love with? She read me lots of stories. A sweet little woman, and to this day I feel sorry for her. If it wasn't for the star I was born under, I wouldn't have left her until she asked me to, or until her husband found out about us. A loving soul, that's the main thing, and it wasn't the favours she granted that showed her lovingness; the very heart of her was loving. She kissed me and all the rest, like any other woman, but sometimes a great quietness would come over her, and then it was wonderful how good she was. She'd look straight into my very soul and talk to me like a mother, and I'd feel about five years old. And even so I left her. The misery. The misery kept dragging me off somewhere. 'Good-bye, Vera Mikhailovna, and forgive me,' I said. 'Good-bye, Sasha,' she said, and then, the crazy woman, she pulled my sleeve up and sank her teeth into my flesh. I almost cried out. She nearly bit a chunk out of my arm—it took three weeks to heal. I still wear the marks."

He bared his muscular arm, very white and well formed, and held it out with a sad and kindly smile. The scar was plainly to be seen

near the elbow joint—two semi-circles with their ends almost meeting. The smiling Konovalov shook his head as he looked at them.

"The crazy woman. That's what she gave me to remember her by."

I had heard such stories before. Almost every tramp will tell you about some "merchant's wife" or "gentlewoman" with whom he has had an affair. And the gentlewoman or merchant's wife has assumed so many aspects in the countless tales told about her that she has become a fantastic personality for all tramps, and one comprising the most contradictory physical and psychological traits. If today she is gay, quick-tempered and blue-eyed, next week she will be kindly, sentimental and black-eyed. Usually the tale is recounted cynically, with innumerable details intended to humiliate the woman.

But I detected a note of truthfulness in Konovalov's account, which contained elements I had never heard before, such as the reading of books and the comparing of himself, a strong and powerful man, to a child.

I imagined this slip of a woman sleeping in his arms, her head resting on his broad

chest. There was something beautiful in the picture, and this helped to convince me of its truth. And in the end, there was the sad and gentle tone—a very special tone—in which he gave his reminiscences of the "merchant's wife." A true tramp never speaks of women or anything else in such a tone; on the contrary, he boasts that there is nothing on earth he holds sacred.

"Why don't you say something? Do you think I'm lying?" asked Konovalov, and there was anxiety in his voice. He was sitting on a sack of flour holding a glass of tea in one hand and slowly stroking his beard with the other. His blue eyes bored into me inquiringly and the lines on his forehead were very marked.

"It's all the truth. Why should I lie? Oh, I know we roughs like to spin yarns. And why shouldn't we? If a fellow's never known anything worth while in life, why shouldn't he make up a fairy-tale and give it out as the truth? It don't do anybody any harm. He comes to believe it himself as he tells it—as if it really did happen that way. Believes it, and—well, it makes him feel good. Lots of

people keep going that way. Can't be helped. But what I told you's the honest truth—that's exactly what happened. Is there anything strange about it? Here's a woman who's not getting any joy out of life. What if I am only the coachman? It makes no difference to a woman—coachmen, gentlemen, officers—we're all the male sex. And all pigs in her eyes—all after the same thing and each of us trying to get it as cheap as possible. The simpler the man, the more conscience he's got, and I'm the simplest of the simple. Women always see that in me—they see I'll never do them harm and never laugh at them. When a woman sins, there's nothing she fears so much as being laughed at, being made sport of. A woman has more sense of shame than we have. When we've had our fun, we're ready to brag about it even in the market-place: you ought to see what a fool of a skirt I caught last night. But a woman can't brag. Nobody thinks she's clever for sinning. The very lowest of them has more sense of shame than we have."

As I listened, I thought: strange sentiments coming from a man like him; can he mean them?

I grew even more astonished as he went on talking, gazing at me with his clear child-like eyes.

The wood in the stove burnt out, leaving a heap of bright coals that cast a rosy glow on the wall of the bakery.

The window framed a square of blue sky set with two stars. One of them, very large, had an emerald sparkle; the other, quite close to it, was very faint.

In a week's time Konovalov and I had become good friends.

"You're a simple sort, and that's what I like," he said with a wide grin, slapping me on the back with an enormous hand.

He was an artist at his job. You should have seen him tossing the seven-pood lump of dough about as he rolled it, or bending over the bin to knead it, his arms buried to the elbow in the resilient mass which gave off a thin squeak as he pressed it in steel fingers.

I scarcely had time to empty a form on to his long-handled tray before he had thrust it into the oven. At first I was afraid he would

place the loaves too close together in his haste, but when he had baked three batches and not one of the hundred and twenty loaves (all well browned and light as a feather) had "collided," I realized he was a master-workman. He loved his work, took it to heart, became fretful if the oven did not heat or the dough was slow in rising, scolded the boss whenever he bought flour of a poor grade, and took a child-like joy and satisfaction in having the loaves turn out perfectly round and fluffy, baked to a turn, with a crisp crust. Sometimes he would take the most perfect loaf off the tray and say laughingly, as he tossed it, steaming, from hand to hand:

"Just see what a pretty thing we've made, you and me!"

It was a pleasure for me to watch this overgrown boy at work, he put so much spirit into it—a thing everyone should do, no matter what his job.

One day I said to him:

"Sasha, they say you can sing."

"I can. But I don't sing any old time, I sing in spells, so to speak. I start when I get the misery. Or if I begin singing first, the

misery's sure to follow. But don't talk about it, and don't tease me. What about you, don't you sing? That's something, singing is! But don't start till I get round to it. Then we'll sing together, shall we?"

I agreed to wait, and would whistle whenever I felt an urge to sing. But sometimes I would forget and begin to hum to myself as I kneaded or rolled the dough. Konovalov would listen, his lips moving, and then remind me of my promise. Occasionally he shouted at me roughly:

"Shut up! Stop wailing!"

One day I took a book out of my box and sat at the window to read.

Konovalov was dozing on a bin, but the rustle of the paper above his head as I turned the pages made him open his eyes.

"What's your book about?"

It was *The Podlipovites.*

"Read it to me, will you?" he asked.

Sitting there on the window-sill I began to read out loud, and he sat up and put his head against my knee as he listened. From time to time I glanced over the book and met his eyes, and to this day they are impressed

on my memory—wide-open, strained, filled with concentrated attention. His mouth, too, was open, showing two rows of even white teeth. It was an inspiration to see his uplifted eyebrows, the broken lines furrowing his high forehead, the hands gripping his knees, his whole form, so still and tense. It made me try to put as much expression as possible into my reading of the sad tale of Pila and Sysoika.

At last I grew tired and closed the book.

"Is that all?" asked Konovalov in a whisper.

"Less than half."

"Will you read it all to me?"

"If you want me to."

"Ah!" he said, taking his head in his hands and swaying from side to side. There was something he wanted to say and he opened and shut his mouth, puffing like a pair of bellows, and narrowing his eyes. I had not expected the reading to have such an effect on him and did not understand what it meant.

"How you read that!" he whispered. "In different voices, each person as if he was alive. Aproska. Pila. What fools they were! Very comical. What comes next? Where will

they go? Jesus, why, it's all *true*, they're real people, honest-to-goodness muzhiks, with true-to-life voices and faces and all the rest. Listen, Maxim, when we've put the bread in the oven, let's read some more."

We put the bread in the oven, got ready another batch, and then I read for another hour and a half. When the bread was ready we stopped again, took it out, put other loaves in, kneaded fresh dough and mixed some yeast. All this we did in feverish haste and almost without speaking. From time to time the frowning Konovalov would snap out monosyllabic instructions to me as he rushed ahead with the work.

It was morning when we finished the book, and my tongue was stiff and sore.

Konovalov was sitting on a sack of flour and looking at me without a word, a strange expression in his eyes, his hands gripping his knees.

"Did you like it?" I asked.

He nodded, screwing up his eyes, and when he spoke it was in a whisper again.

"Who made that up?" His eyes were full of a wonder not to be expressed in words, and

suddenly his face was lighted by an upsurge of strong feeling.

I told him who had written the book.

"What a man! He caught it just right, didn't he? It almost makes you afraid. Makes the shivers run up and down your spine, it's so true to life. What about him—that writer-fellow—what did he get for doing it?"

"That is. . .?"

"Didn't they give him something—a decoration or something?"

"Why should they give him a decoration?" I asked.

"Well, a book—it's like a police proclamation: people read it and begin talking about it. About what Pila and Sysoika were like, for instance. Nobody could help feeling sorry for them, living in such darkness. A dog's life. And so. . . ."

"And so what?"

Konovalov glanced at me self-consciously.

"There ought to be some measures taken," he said meekly. "They're human beings. Somebody ought to help them."

I made a long speech in reply, but alas! it did not make the impression I hoped it would.

Konovalov grew thoughtful, dropped his head, sighed, and rocked back and forth, but not once did he interrupt me. I grew tired at last and stopped.

He raised his head and looked at me sadly.

"So they didn't give him a thing?" he said.

"Who?" I asked, having quite forgotten about the author.

"That writer-fellow."

I did not answer, annoyed because he evidently considered himself incapable of grappling with philosophical problems.

Konovalov took up the book, turned it reverently in his hands, opened it, shut it, put it down, and gave a sigh.

"What a deep thing!" he said in a low voice. "Here's a man writes a book... nothing but paper with little marks on it... writes it, and... is this man dead?"

"Yes," I said.

"He's dead, but his book is here and people read it. A person looks at it with his eyes and pronounces different words. And another person listens and finds out that there once lived people named Pila, Sysoika and Aproska. And he feels sorry for them, even

though he never set eyes on them and they're just—just nothing to him. Maybe he passes dozens of live people like them on the street every day without knowing anything about them, and it makes no difference to him—he doesn't even notice them. But when he meets them in a book his heart fairly bursts with pity for them. How do you explain that?... So that writer-fellow died without any reward, did he? Just nothing at all?"

I grew angry and told him how writers were rewarded.

Konovalov looked at me with frightened eyes and clicked his tongue to show his sympathy.

"A fine state of affairs," he sighed, then hung his head and chewed the left end of his moustache.

I began to speak about the fatal role of the pub in the life of Russian men of letters, I told him about the truly great and profound writers who have been ruined by vodka, to which they turned as their only comfort in a life full of hardship.

"Do such people drink?" asked Konovalov in an awed whisper. In his wide eyes I read

distrust of what I had said, and fear and pity for those men. "Do they really drink? I suppose it's after they write their books that they take to drink, isn't it?"

Not finding much point to this question, I ignored it.

"After, of course," decided Konovalov. "These writer-fellows are like sponges that suck up other people's sorrow. They have a special kind of eyes for this. And hearts, too. If they look at life for a long time it gives them the misery. And they pour it out into their books. But that don't help, because their hearts are touched, and you can't even burn out the misery, once it's in your heart. So there's only one thing left—to drown it out in vodka. That's why they drink. Am I right?"

I said he was, and this seemed to encourage him.

"But to be fair," he went on, delving deeper into the psychology of a writer, "they ought to be rewarded, oughtn't they? Because they understand more than other people and point out to others what is wrong with life. Take me, for instance—what am I? A tramp,

a drunkard, a good-for-nothing, a soiled character. There's no sense in a life like mine. What's the point of my living in this world? Who needs me, when you come to it? No wife, no children, no place to call my own, and not even any hankering after them. I just live on in my misery, nobody knows why. There's nothing inside me to point the way. How shall I put it? No spark in my soul—no strength, perhaps. Whatever you call it, it's just not there, and that's that. So I go on living and searching for that something, and longing for it, but what it is, I don't know."

He looked at me, his head resting on his hand, his face reflecting the thoughts striving to take shape in his mind.

"Well?" I urged.

"Well—I don't know how to put it, but I think if one of those writer-fellows came along and had a look at me, he might be able to explain my life, mightn't he? What do you think?"

I thought that I myself could do this, and instantly undertook to give what I thought a very clear and simple explanation. I spoke

about circumstances and environment, about inequality, about those who were the lords of life, and those who were their victims.

Konovalov listened attentively. He was sitting opposite me, his cheek in his hand, and gradually a veil seemed to be drawn over his big blue eyes that were wide-open and bespoke a gifted and thoughtful nature; the lines in his forehead deepened, and he scarcely seemed to breathe, so intense was his effort to grasp what I was saying.

This flattered me. With great fervour I drew a picture of his life for him, showing that he was not to blame for what he was. He was a victim of circumstances, a person who, equal to all others by birth, had been made a social nonentity by a chain of injustices stretching far back in history. I finished by saying:

"You have nothing to blame yourself for. You have been wronged."

He said nothing, just sat there with his eyes fixed on me. I could see a bright smile forming in their depths, and I waited impatiently to hear what he would say.

With a soft laugh he leaned toward me and

put his hand on my shoulder in a soft feminine gesture.

"How easy you explain it, pal. Where did you get all that? Out of books? You've certainly read a lot. If only I'd read that much! But the main thing is, you put the milk of human kindness into what you say. I've never heard anyone talk like that before. A strange thing—most people blame others for the wrongs they suffer, but you blame the whole of life, the whole system. According to you, a man isn't to blame for anything himself; if he was born to be a tramp, a tramp he'll be. And what you say about convicts is very queer: they steal because they have no work and have to get food somehow. Very generous you are. You've got a damned soft heart."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Do you agree with me? Do you think what I said is right or not?"

"You know better than me whether it's right or not. You can read. If you take other folks, I guess you're right, but if you take me. . . ."

"Well?"

"I'm a special case. Who's to blame for me being a drunkard? My brother Pavel don't drink. He's got his own bakery in Perm. I'm a better workman than he is, yet I'm a tramp and a drunk, and there's nothing else you can say for me. Yet we were both born of the same mother. He's even younger than I am. So you see there must be something wrong with me myself. I must have been born wrong. You say all people are equal. But I'm a special case. And not only me—there are lots of others like me. We're special people—don't fit into any picture. And we need special judgement. And special laws—hard laws, to drive us off the earth, because we don't do anybody any good; we only take up room and stand in other people's way. Who's to blame for that? We ourselves are to blame. Because we have no love of life, nor even of ourselves."

This enormous man with eyes as clear as a baby's despatched with himself so lightly, branded himself as worthless and therefore to be driven off the earth with such a heart-rending smile, that I was dumbfounded. Never before had I found the quality of self-

abnegation in a tramp, most of whom are by their very natures isolated from everything about them, hostile to everything, and only too eager to make everything the target of sneering spitefulness. The people I had met thus far were always blaming others, always lodging complaints, stubbornly closing their eyes to the undeniable evidence contradicting their claims to impeccability. They invariably attributed their failures to the cruelty of fate or the wickedness of others. Konovalov did not blame fate or accuse others. He alone was to blame for the mess his life had become, and the harder I tried to prove to him that he was "a victim of circumstances and environment," the stronger he insisted that he alone was to blame for his state. This was an original approach, but it infuriated me. He found pleasure in chastising himself; it was pleasure that gleamed in his eyes as he cried out in his resounding voice:

"Every man is his own master, and nobody but me is responsible if I am a rascal!"

I would not have been surprised to hear a cultivated person say such a thing, for all sorts of sores break out on that elaborate

psychic organism known as "an intellectual." But it was strange to hear it coming from the lips of this rough, albeit he was an intellectual among those wronged, hungry, naked, resentful half-men and half-beasts who are to be found in the festering slums of our cities. There was nothing for it but to conclude that Konovalov was indeed "a special case," but I did not wish to.

In outward appearance he was, down to the slightest detail, a typical tramp, but the better I got to know him, the more convinced I became that here was a type at variance with the ideal I had formed in my mind of a people who should long ago have been looked upon as a class, and who well deserve our attention as being uncommonly avid and eager, extremely vicious, and by no means stupid.

Our argument waxed hotter.

"Listen," I cried, "how can a man stand on his feet when all sorts of dark forces are pressing him down on all sides?"

"Let him hold on tighter," said my opponent vehemently, his eyes flashing.

"Hold on to what?"

"Let him find something and hold on to it."

"Why don't you?"

"You funny duck! Didn't I tell you I myself was to blame? I haven't found anything to hold on to. I keep looking for it and longing for it, but I can't find it."

But it was time to think of the bread, and we set to work, still trying to prove to each other the correctness of our points of view. Of course we proved nothing, and when our work was over, we lay down, tired and overwrought.

Konovalov flung himself on the floor and was soon asleep. I lay on some sacks of flour, from which vantage point I looked down upon his powerful bearded form, stretched like a storied hero on some bast matting near one of the bins. There was a smell of hot bread, sour dough and burning logs in the room. Gradually it grew light, and a grey sky glanced through the flour-dusted window-pane. A cart squeaked past and a cowherd blew his horn to gather the herd.

Konovalov snored. As I watched the rise and fall of his massive chest I tried to think of a quick means of converting him to my creed, but I dozed off before I had succeeded.

In the morning we got up, mixed the yeast, washed ourselves, and sat down on a bench to drink tea.

"Have you got any other books?" asked Konovalov.

"Yes."

"Will you read them to me?"

"All right."

"Good. Look here, I'll go on working for a month, get my pay from the boss and give you half."

"What for?"

"To buy books. Buy whatever you like for yourself, and buy me—maybe two. Books about muzhiks. People like Pila and Sysoika. But see they're written with feeling, not just for the fun of it. Some books are just rubbish. Take that "Panfilka and Filatka"—trash, even if it has got a picture on the front. Or about the Poshekhontsy and other fairy-tales. I don't like such stuff. I never knew there were books like the one you have."

"Would you like me to read to you about Stenka Razin?"

"Stenka? Is it good?"

"Very."

"Let's have it."

And so I began reading him Kostomarov's *Stenka Razin's Uprising.* At first this talented monograph, almost an epic poem, was not to the taste of my bearded listener.

"Why isn't there any talk in it?" he asked, glancing into the book. While I was explaining he tried to hide a yawn. This made him feel ashamed, and he said guiltily:

"Go ahead and read. Don't mind me."

But as, with the skill of an artist, the historian drew the portrait of Stepan Razin, and this "prince of the Volga freemen" rose imposingly from the pages of the book, Konovalov underwent a transformation. Hitherto bored, indifferent and heavy-eyed, he gradually and without my noticing it appeared before me in an astonishing new aspect. From where he sat on the bench opposite me, his arms encircling his knees, his chin on his knees so that his beard covered his legs, he devoured me with burning eyes that looked out from under drawn brows. There was not a sign of that child-like naiveness that I found so surprising in him, and all the simplicity, the feminine gentleness that went so well with

his kindly blue eyes—now dark and slit-like—had disappeared. There was something flaming, something leonine, in his body, which had become a bundle of taut muscles. I stopped reading.

"Go on," he said quietly but firmly.

"What's the matter?"

"Go on!" he repeated, and his request was tinged with irritation.

I went on, and I could see as I glanced up at him from time to time that he was growing more and more excited. He emanated something—a sort of hot vapour—that stimulated, even intoxicated me. At last I came to the place where Stenka is captured.

"So they caught him!" cried Konovalov. The cry was full of pain, wrath, resentment.

Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead and his eyes were strangely dilated. He jumped up off the bench and stood in front of me, tall and trembling.

"Wait. Stop reading," he said quickly, putting his hand on my shoulder. "Tell me what will happen next. No, don't tell me. Will they kill him? Read on, Maxim, quickly."

One might have thought that Konovalov

and not Frolka was Razin's brother. It seemed that there were blood ties undissolved by the passage of three hundred years binding this tramp to Stenka. With all the force of his strong and vigorous body, with all the passion of a soul yearning for "something to hold on to," he was experiencing the pain and wrath the freedom-loving rebel had known on being captured three centuries before.

"Go on reading, for Christ's sake!"

I read on, deeply agitated, conscious of the beating of my own heart, sharing with Konovalov the pain that Stenka suffered. Soon we came to the place where he is tortured.

Konovalov set his jaws and his blue eyes flashed fire. He leaned over my shoulder, keeping his eyes glued to the page. His breath was loud in my ear and it blew my hair into my eyes. I tossed it back. Seeing this, Konovalov laid a heavy palm on my head.

"Then Razin clenched his teeth so hard that they fell out, and he spat them out with the blood on the floor. . . ."

"Stop! To hell with it!" cried Konovalov, and he snatched the book out of my hands

and threw it on the floor with all his might, he himself sinking down beside it.

He cried, and since he was ashamed to cry, he growled to disguise the sound. He hid his head between his knees and cried, wiping his eyes on his dirty cotton trousers.

I sat on the bench in front of him, unable to find words of comfort.

"Maxim!" said Konovalov from where he sat on the floor. "Think of it! Pila . . . Sysoika . . . and now Stenka. What an end. Think of spitting your teeth out like that!"

A shudder passed over him.

He was especially shocked by Stenka's spitting out his teeth, and kept coming back to it, giving nervous little jerks of his shoulders as he mentioned it.

Our heads reeled under the impression of the brutal picture of human torture that had been presented to us.

"Read it to me again, will you?" coaxed Konovalov, picking up the book and handing it to me. "Here, show me where that place about the teeth is."

I pointed it out to him and he fixed his eyes on the lines.

"Is that really what's written: he spat out his teeth with the blood? The letters here are just like all the others. God! how it must have hurt him, eh? Even his teeth. And what will come later? Will they kill him? Thank God they'll kill him in the end!"

His joy was expressed with intense feeling, with a look of supreme satisfaction in his eyes, and I shuddered at the contemplation of a compassion so ardently desiring the death of the tortured Stenka.

We lived in a daze for the rest of the day, speaking only of Stenka, recalling the events of his life, the songs written about him, the tortures he underwent. Twice Konovalov began singing one of these songs in his rich baritone, but both times he broke off in the middle.

From that day he and I were even closer friends.

I read *Stenka Razin's Uprising*, *Taras Bulba* and *Poor People* to him several times. My listener was greatly impressed by *Taras Bulba*, but it could not eclipse the deep impression made on him by Kostomarov's book. He could not understand Makar Devushkin

and Varya. He found the language of Makar's letters laughable, and was sceptical in his attitude towards Varya.

"Just see how she makes up to that old man! Sly of her—making up to a scarecrow like him. But stop wasting time on that junk, Maxim. What's there in it? Him writes to her, her writes to him—nothing but a waste of paper. To hell with them. Nothing funny, nothing sad in it; what's it written for?"

I said they resembled the Podlipovtsi, but he disagreed.

"Pila and Sysoika—that's different. They're real people, living and putting up a fight. But what are these? All they do is write letters. Boring. They're not even live people—just made up. Take Taras and Stenka—God, if they ever got together, wouldn't they do things! They'd put new life into Pila and Sysoika!"

He had a muddled conception of time and supposed that all his favourite characters had been contemporaries, two of them living in Usolye, one among the *khokhols*,[1] the fourth

[1] Derogatory nickname for Ukrainians.—*Tr.*

on the Volga. I had difficulty in convincing him that if Sysoika and Pila had sailed down the Volga they would not have found Stenka, and if Stenka had ever reached the Don Cossacks and joined the *khokhols*, he would not have found Bulba there.

Konovalov was disappointed on learning the truth. I told him something about the Pugachev uprising, anxious to see what he would think of Pugachev. Konovalov would have none of him.

"A dirty swindler, that's what he was. Hid behind the tsar's name to stir up the people. How many good men died because of him! Stenka? He was different. That Pugachev was a skunk and nothing more. Got any more books like the one about Stenka? Look and see. But drop that idiot of a Makar, he's not interesting. I'd rather hear you read how they killed Stenka again."

On our days off Konovalov and I would go to the meadows across the river. We would take some vodka and bread and a book, and set out in the morning for "our airing," as Konovalov called it.

We were especially fond of going to the

"glass works." That, for some inexplicable reason, was the name given to a building standing in an open field not far from the town. It was brick, three-storeyed, with a caved-in roof, broken windows, and a cellar filled with foul-smelling water all summer long. Ramshackled, grey-green, with a run-to-seed look, it stood there in the field gazing at the town out of the dark sockets of its shattered windows, for all the world like a dying cripple who has been banished from town. Year after year the spring floods washed over it, but it remained standing, surrounded by pools of water that protected it from frequent visits by the police. Despite its caved-in roof, it offered shelter to all sorts of dubious vagabonds.

There were always lots of them there. Ragged, half-starved, shrinking from sunlight, they lived like owls among the ruins. Konovalov and I were always welcome guests, because on leaving the bakery we would each take a loaf of white bread and buy a half-pint of vodka and a hawker's trayful of "stew"—liver, lungs, heart and tripe. For only two or three rubles we provided the

"glass-folk," as Konovalov called them, with a fine meal.

In exchange for our treat they would tell us stories in which the horrible soul-stirring truth was fantastically interwoven with the most obvious falsehood. Each story was a bit of black lace (the truth), stitched with bright colours (the lies). This lace twisted itself about heart and brain, strangling them in its harsh, diverse patterns. The "glass-folk" grew attached to us in their way. I often read to them, and they usually listened with thoughtful attention.

I was struck by the profound knowledge of life shown by these people whom life had thrown overboard, and I eagerly listened to their stories. Konovalov listened, too, but only so that he could contradict their philosophical views and draw me into an argument.

When one of these creatures in a fantastic state of undress and with a physiognomy suggesting that one would do well to keep one's distance, told the story of his life and ruin (which invariably became a speech in self-defence and self-justification) Konovalov

would smile musingly and shake his head. They noticed this.

"Don't you believe me, Sasha?" the one who had told the story would demand.

"Of course, I believe you. You've got to believe what a man says. Even if you know he's lying, believe him; listen to him and try to find out what makes him lie. Sometimes a man's lies show you what he is, better than the truth. And what are our lives like, when you get down to it? Just plain muck. So we dress them up by telling lies. Am I right?"

"You're right," his interlocutor would agree. "But why did you shake your head?"

"Because you don't look at things right. You talk as if it wasn't you yourself who made you what you are, but the first bloke who came along. Why did you let him? Why didn't you put up a fight? We're always complaining about other people, but we're men, too, aren't we? And so we can be complained of, too. If somebody's always getting in our way, we're probably getting in somebody else's way, isn't that so? How can you explain that?"

"Life ought to be made over so that there would be plenty of room for everybody and

nobody would get in anybody else's way," they answered.

"Who's to make it over?" he demanded challengingly, and hastened to answer before anyone else could, "We are. We ourselves. But how are we to make it over if we don't know how? If we can't make anything worth while out of our *own* lives? It turns out we have no one to turn to but ourselves, and as for ourselves—well, we all know what *we* are."

They objected and tried to find excuses for themselves, but he stubbornly stuck to his point: each man is responsible for what he is and nobody else is to be blamed for his failure.

It was quite impossible to budge him from this position, and just as impossible to accept his view of people. On the one hand, they were, in his opinion, fully capable of remaking life so that all should enjoy freedom, and on the other, they were a weak, spineless lot, incapable of doing anything but complain of each other.

Often these arguments, begun at noon, ended at midnight, and Konovalov and I would return from the "glass-folk" in pitch darkness and up to our knees in mud.

Once we were nearly sucked down into a bog; another time we got caught in a police raid and spent the night in the station along with some twenty of our pals from the "glass-works" who had roused the suspicion of the police. Sometimes we had no desire to philosophize, and then the two of us would walk far out over the meadows on the other side of the river until we came to some small lakes teeming with little fish deposited there by the spring floods. For the sole purpose of enhancing the beauty of the scene we would build a fire in the bushes lining the shore of one of these lakes and then read or talk about life. Sometimes Konovalov would say whimsically:

"Maxim, let's just look at the sky."

And we would lie on our backs and gaze into the fathomless blue vault above us. At first we were conscious of the rustling of the leaves and the rippling of the water and felt the ground beneath us. But slowly the blue sky seemed to draw us up into it, we lost all sense of existence, and, as if taking off from the earth, floated out in the heavenly expanses in a state of drowsy contemplation which we feared to disturb by word or movement.

Thus would we lie for hours at a time, and would return to work with new strength, physically and spiritually refreshed.

Konovalov loved nature with a profound, inarticulate love, and whenever he was in the fields or on the river he would fall into a serene and gentle mood which increased his resemblance to a child. Occasionally he would say with a deep sigh, as he gazed at the sky:

"Ah, this is the thing!"

And there was more thought and feeling in this single exclamation than in the effusions of many poets, especially those who are inspired rather by the desire to be looked upon as people of exquisite sensibilities, than by true adoration of the beauties of nature. Poetry, like everything else, loses its sacred simplicity when it is made a profession.

Thus, day by day, two months passed. Konovalov and I did a great deal of talking and a great deal of reading. I read him *Stenka Razin's Uprising* so often that he could tell the story in his own words, page by page, from beginning to end. It became for him

what a delightful fairy-tale is to an impressionable child. He named the objects used in his work after different characters in the book, and once when a bowl fell off the shelf and broke, he exclaimed angrily:

"Damn you, Captain Prozorovsky!"

If the dough was slow in rising he called it "Frolka"; the yeast was "Stenka's thoughts"; while Stenka himself was synonymous for everything great and exceptional, though ill-starred and doomed to failure.

During all that time Capitolina, whose letter I had read and answered on the day I first met Konovalov, was almost never mentioned.

Konovalov sent her money through Philip, asking him to speak to the police about her, but no reply came from either Philip or the girl.

And then suddenly one evening when we were getting the dough ready to put into the oven, the bakery door was opened and from the darkness of the damp area came a girl's deep voice:

"I beg your pardon."

The tone was at once timid and bantering.

"Who do you want?" I asked.

Konovalov let one end of the tray fall on the floor and began to pull at his beard disconcertedly.

"Does baker Konovalov work here?"

Now she was standing in the door-way, and the light from the hanging lamp fell full on her head, which was swathed in a white woollen shawl. From out of its folds glanced a round and pretty face with up-tilted nose and round cheeks that dimpled when her full red lips parted in a smile.

"He does," I answered.

"He does, he does!" broke in Konovalov joyfully, throwing down the other end of the tray and taking long strides to reach her.

"Sasha!" she gasped.

They threw their arms about each other, Konovalov bending almost double.

"How are you? When did you get here? Just think! Are you free? Good! See, what did I tell you? Now you've got a clear path ahead. Walk straight down it without being afraid of anything," said Konovalov impetuously, still standing in the door-way and

keeping his arms about her shoulders and waist.

"You carry on alone today, Maxim, while I look after the lady. Where are you planning to stay, Capa?"

"Here, with you."

"Here? You can't stay here. We bake bread here, and besides—well, you just can't stay here. Our boss is very strict. We'll have to fix you up for the night somewhere else. Maybe in a hotel. Come along."

And out they went. I stayed behind to do the baking and did not expect Konovalov back until morning, but to my great surprise he turned up in three hours. My surprise increased when, on glancing into his face, I found him looking tired and crest-fallen, instead of beaming with happiness as I thought he should be.

"What's the matter?" I asked, wondering what could have thrown my friend into a mood so out of keeping with the circumstances.

"Nothing," he answered gloomily, and after a moment's silence he spat fiercely.

"But, after all . . ." I insisted.

"What's it to you?" he said wearily, lying

down on the bench. "'After all, after all . . .' After all she's a skirt."

It took a great deal of effort on my part to wring an explanation from him, but at last he gave it to me in approximately the following words:

"A skirt, I tell you. And if I wasn't such a damn fool all this would never have happened, understand? You keep saying women are human beings, too. Of course they walk about on their hind legs, they don't chew grass, they know how to talk and laugh, but still they're not our kind. Why? I don't know. I just know they're not, that's all. Take this Capitolina, here's her line: 'I want to live with you,' she says, 'like your wife. I want to follow you around like your dog.' Did you ever hear anything so crazy? 'Come now, sweetheart,' I says, 'you're talking nonsense. Judge for yourself—how could you ever live with me? First of all, I'm a drunk. Secondly, I haven't got a roof over my head. Thirdly, I'm a tramp and can't live in one place a long time . . .' and so on, giving lots of reasons. But she says, 'To hell with your being a drunkard, all workmen are drunkards, but they

have wives just the same; as for a roof over your head, once you have a wife you'll have a roof, and then you won't want to go roaming any more.' 'No, Capa,' I says, 'I can't see it your way because I know I'm not fit for that sort of life and I never will be.' But she says, 'Then I'll throw myself into the river.' 'You little fool!' I says, and then she lams into me: 'You swine, you crook, deceiving me like this, you long-legged louse!' she says, and goes on and on until I'm ready to run away. Then she begins to cry. Cries and keeps blaming me: 'Why did you let me come here if you didn't want me? Why did you have me leave that place,' she says, 'and what am I to do with myself now, you blasted fool?' . . . Well, what am I to do with her?"

"But why *did* you have her come here?" I asked.

"Why? You're a queer egg! Because I felt sorry for her. Anybody'd feel sorry for a person he saw sinking in the mud. But as for tying myself up and all that—not on your life! I'll never agree to a thing like that. What kind of a family man am I? If *that* was the thing I found to hold on to, I'd have got

married long ago. What chances I've had! With a dowery and everything. But how can I do such a thing if it's beyond my power? She cries all the time, and that, of course, is too bad. But what am I to do? I just can't."

He shook his head in confirmation of his mournful "I just can't," got up off the bench and, rumpling his beard with both hands, began pacing the floor of the bakery with lowered head, spitting out his disgust from time to time.

"Maxim!" he said, and there was supplication and embarrassment in his tone. "Maybe you'll go and tell her how things stand, eh? That's a good boy."

"What shall I tell her?"

"Tell her the whole truth. Say I can't do it; it's just not in me. Or else say—say I've got some bad disease."

"But that's not true," I laughed.

"No, but it's a good excuse, isn't it? Damn it all, what a mess! What in the world would I ever do with a wife?"

He threw up his hands in a gesture of such blank despair that it was clear he could do nothing with a wife. And though the way he

put the story was comical, its dramatic side made me wonder what would happen to the girl. He kept walking up and down and talking as if to himself:

"And I don't like her any more—not the least bit. She keeps pulling at me, sucking me down like a bog. Thinks she's found herself a husband. Humph. She's not very clever, but she's sly."

It was no doubt the vagabond instinct asserting itself, the irrepressible love of freedom that seemed to be under threat.

"But I'm not to be caught with such bait! I'm a big fish, I am," he boasted. "I'll show her; and . . . and . . . why shouldn't I?" He stopped in the middle of the room and fell to thinking, a smile playing over his lips. As I watched his face, suddenly very animated, I tried to guess what he had decided to do.

"Maxim! Let's hit it for the Kuban!"

This was unexpected. I had been fostering certain literary-educational plans which centred in him. I hoped to teach him to read and write and to pass on to him all the knowledge I had so far accumulated. He had promised to remain here for the summer, a thing

which would have facilitated my task, and now. . .?

"You're talking nonsense," I said, put out.

"Then what am I to do?" he ejaculated.

I tried to tell him Capitolina's intentions were not as serious as he seemed to think, and that he must wait and see what would happen.

As it turned out, we had not long to wait.

We were sitting on the floor in front of the oven, our backs to the window. It was nearly midnight, an hour and a half or so since Konovalov had come back. All of a sudden there was a sound of shattering glass and a fair-sized cobble-stone came rolling across the floor. We both jumped up in fright and ran to the window.

"Missed!" someone whined. "A bad aim. O-o-o, if only. . . ."

"C'mon," roared a deep bass voice. "C'mon, I'll see to him later."

Through the broken window came hysterical drunken laughter, the laughter of desperation, so thin and high that it set one's teeth on edge.

"It's her," said Konovalov miserably.

I could see nothing but two legs dangling

down into the window excavation. There they hung, swinging, the heels striking against the brick wall as if seeking a foothold.

"C'mon," muttered the man.

"Let go! Stop pulling me! Let me have my say! Good-bye, Sasha! Good-bye—" and what followed would not bear printing.

I moved closer to the window so that I could see Capitolina. She was bending down holding on to the pavement, trying to see inside the bakery, and her loosened hair had fallen over her breast and shoulders. Her white shawl had slipped off her head and the neck of her dress was ripped open. Capitolina was drunk. She swayed from side to side, hiccuping, swearing, shrieking hysterically, trembling, her clothes torn, her face flushed and wet with tears.

A tall man was bending over her.

"C'mon!" he kept shouting, one hand on her shoulder, the other on the wall of the house.

"Sasha! You've been my ruin, remember that! God damn you, you red-headed devil! I wish to God you'd never been born. I counted on you, and you spit in my face. All right,

we'll settle accounts yet! Hiding from me, are you? Ashamed of yourself, you pig-faced monster! Sasha. . . lovey. . . ."

"I'm not hiding from anybody," said Konovalov in a husky voice as he kneeled on the bench in front of the window. "I'm not hiding. And you shouldn't say such things. I wanted to help you. I thought good would come of what I did, but you've spoiled everything."

"Sasha! Could you kill me?"

"Why did you get drunk? Who knows what tomorrow may bring?"

"Sasha! Sasha! Drown me!"

"Drop it! C'mon!" said the man's voice.

"You rotter! Why did you have to pretend to be decent?"

"What's the row about? Who are these people?"

The night watchman's whistle intercepted the talk, drowned it out, then broke off.

"Why did I ever trust you, you devil?" sobbed the girl at the window.

Suddenly her legs flew out, then they were quickly drawn up and disappeared in the darkness. Blurred voices and the sounds of a struggle could be heard.

"I don't want to go to the police-station! Sa-a-a-sha!" cried the girl desperately.

Heavy steps rang out on the pavement.

Whistles, muted grunts and cries.

"Sa-a-a-sha! Sasha . . . dearie."

It was as if someone were being brutally tortured. All of this receded into the night, grew faint, fainter, and at last vanished like a bad dream.

Konovalov and I were so stunned by what had happened that we went on staring into the darkness, unable to rid ourselves of the cries, sobs, oaths, groans, and the shouts of the police. As I recalled certain of the sounds, I could not make myself believe all this had really happened—too swiftly had this brief but intense drama been enacted.

"The end," said Konovalov tersely and simply as he listened once more into the silence of the dark night which gazed with such calm severity through the window.

"The things she said to me!" he went on after a pause, still kneeling on the bench with his arms on the window-sill. "So she's been caught by the police. Drunk. And with that sot. It didn't take her long to make up her

mind." He gave a deep sigh, got off the bench, sat on a sack of flour, took his head in his hands and rocked from side to side.

"Tell me this, Maxim: what happened?" he said under his breath. "And what am I to do about it?"

I told him. I said that first of all a person ought to know what he wanted and ought to see what a step would lead to before he took it. He had not known and had not seen, and so he was to blame for what had happened. I was furious with him. That drunken "C'mon" and the cries and groans of Capitolina still rang in my ears, and I showed my friend no mercy.

He heard me out with lowered head. When I had finished, he looked up, and I saw that he was shocked and frightened.

"How do you like that!" he ejaculated. "What'll happen next? How must I act? What am I to do with her?"

There was such child-like frankness and perplexed helplessness in his admission of guilt that I instantly felt sorry for him and regretted having spoken so harshly.

"Why did I ever bring her here?" he asked

repentantly. "Damn it all! What must she think of me now? I'll go to the police-station and try to get her out. I'll see her and . . . do what I can. I'll tell her . . . something or other. Shall I go?"

I said I didn't think anything would come of their seeing each other. What could he tell her? Besides, she was drunk and probably sleeping by then.

But he was set on going.

"I'll go, all right. After all, I *do* want to help her. Those people there don't give a damn for her. I'll go. You tend to things here. I'll be right back."

He pulled on his cap and went out, forgetting to put on the worn-out shoes that were his pride.

I did my work and went to sleep, and when I woke up in the morning and glanced, as usual, into the corner where Konovalov slept, he was not there.

It was evening when he put in an appearance—sullen, unkempt, with deep lines in his forehead and a shadow darkening his blue eyes. Without looking at me, he went over to the bins, inspected what I had

done, and lay down on the floor without a word.

"Did you see her?" I asked.

"That's what I went for, isn't it?"

"Well, what happened?"

"Nothing."

Clearly he did not wish to talk. I did not pry him with questions, sure that the mood would pass. All the next day his conversation was limited to the brief words required by our work; he went about with his eyes on the ground and his glance shadowed as it had been when he came back. Some light inside him seemed to have gone out. He worked slowly and half-heartedly, weighed down by his thoughts. That night, when we had put the last batch of bread into the oven and were afraid to lie down for fear it would burn, he said to me:

"Read something from 'Stenka'."

I began to read the description of Stenka's torture and execution, since this was the passage that roused his emotions more than any other. He lay stretched out on his back on the floor, gazing without blinking at the soot-covered ceiling arches.

"So that's how they did away with a man," said Konovalov slowly. "But even so it was easier to live then. Freer. At least there was something to do with your energy. Nowadays everything's quiet and peaceful—very peaceful if you look at it from the outside. Books and learning and all that. But a man lives without anyone to stand by him and no one to look after him. It's forbidden to do wrong, but it's impossible not to. And so there's order outside, but a fine mix-up inside. And nobody can understand anybody else."

"How are things with you and Capitolina?" I asked.

"What?" he replied, shaking himself. "With Capa? All off," and he gave a resolute wave of his hand.

"So you cut the strings?"

"Not me. She did it herself."

"How?"

"Very simply. Stuck to her point and wouldn't have it any other way. So we're right back to where we were. Only she didn't use to drink, and now she does. You take out the bread, I'm going to sleep."

The bakery grew quiet. The lamp smoked,

from time to time there was a crackling sound in the flue, and the crust of the baked loaves standing on the shelves crackled, too. The night watchmen stood talking outside our window, and another sound drifted in from time to time—perhaps it was the creaking of our sign, perhaps it was someone groaning.

I took out the bread and lay down, but I could not go to sleep, just lay there listening to the night sounds with half-closed eyes. Suddenly I saw Konovalov get up without a sound, go over to the shelf, take Kostomarov's book, open it, and hold it to his eyes. I could clearly see his thoughtful face, I watched him move his finger down the printed lines, shake his head, turn the page, study it closely, and then glance at me. There was something strange, something very intense and searching in his drawn face; for a long time he looked at me, and I had never seen him wear such a look before.

Unable to restrain my curiosity, I asked him what he was doing.

"I thought you were asleep," he apologized. Then he came over, book in hand, sat down beside me, and said haltingly, "Look,

this is what I wanted to ask you. Isn't there some book that gives rules of living? That teaches you how to act? What I'd like to know is—what's wrong to do and what's... what's right. It makes me sick, the things I do. They start out good, but they end up bad. Take this business with Capa." He drew a deep breath and then said imploringly, "Please try to find such a book and read it to me."

He paused.

"Maxim."

"What?"

"The things Capitolina said to me!"

"What of it? Forget it."

"Of course it don't make any difference now. But tell me, had she a right to?"

That was a ticklish question, but after a moment's consideration I said she had.

"I think so, too. She did have a right to," said Konovalov gloomily, and became silent.

He tossed about on the bast mat on the floor; several times he got up, lit a cigarette, sat down at the window, then lay on the floor again.

At last I fell asleep, and when I woke up he was gone. He came back in the evening.

It was as though he were covered with a thick layer of dust, and there was a frozen expression in his hazy eyes. Tossing his cap on the shelf, he heaved a sigh and sat down next to me.

"Where have you been?"

"To see Capa."

"Well?"

"It's all over, pal. Just as I said."

"There's nothing to be done with people like her," I said in an attempt to cheer him, adding a few words about the force of habit and whatever else seemed to fit the situation. Konovalov sat staring at the floor and said not a word until I finished.

"Oh no, you're wrong. That's not the root of the matter. It's just that I'm like a disease. I wasn't meant to live in this world. I give off poison. As soon as anybody comes close to me, he gets poisoned. There's nothing I can bring anybody but grief. When you stop to think of it, who have I ever brought happiness? Not a soul. And I've known lots of people in my life. There's something rotten about me."

"Nonsense."

"It's the truth," he said with a nod of conviction.

I tried to prove he was wrong, but whatever I said only convinced him more firmly that he was not fit to live in this world.

A quick and radical change took place in him. He became languid, abstracted, taciturn, unsociable; he lost interest in books and no longer worked with his former zeal.

In leisure hours he would lie on the floor and gaze steadily up at the vaulted ceiling. His cheeks grew sunken and his eyes lost their clear and child-like shine.

"What's the matter, Sasha?" I asked.

"A bout's beginning," he explained. "Soon I'll start guzzling vodka. My insides smart as if they'd been seared. The time's come. If it hadn't been for what's happened I might have held out longer. Well, so that's that. But how do you explain it—here I thought I was doing a person good, and it turns out just the opposite. We need rules on how to act, pal. Would it really be so hard to make them, those rules, so that all people would act the same and understand each other? How can people be expected to live with such a big

space separating them from one another? Haven't they the brains to know they've got to bring order into life, and see that everybody knows what's what? God!"

He was so absorbed in thoughts about the necessity of bringing order into life that he paid no attention to what I said. I noticed that he avoided me. One day, on hearing me expound my ideas on the remaking of life for the hundredth time, he flared up.

"Shut up. I've heard all that before. It isn't life that's to blame, but people. People are the main thing, understand? And that's all there is to it. According to what you say, people ought to stay just as they are until things are changed. Oh no, first change *people*, show them how to act; then everything will be clear and they won't get in each other's way. That's what we've got to do for people. Teach them to get in the right lane."

When I objected, he lost his temper or became glum.

"Oh, leave me alone," he would say.

Once he went away in the evening and did not come back to work that night or the next day. Instead, the boss came and said anxiously:

"Sasha's on a bout. He's sitting in 'The Wall.' We'll have to find another baker."

"Maybe he'll come out of it?"

"Not a chance, I know him."

I went to "The Wall," a pub artfully wedged into the stone wall that gave it its name. Its distinguishing characteristic was that it boasted not a single window, the light falling through an opening in the roof. As a matter of fact it was nothing but a square hole in the ground covered by shingles. It smelled of earth, makhorka, and vodka, and was always crowded with the suspicious-looking characters who were its steady customers. For days on end they would lounge there, waiting for some workman to go on a spree so that they could drink the shirt off his back.

Konovalov was sitting at a big table in the middle of the pub surrounded by six gentlemen in rags and tatters and with faces that might have belonged to characters from one of Hoffmann's tales. They were listening to him with fawning attention as they drank beer and vodka and ate something that looked like lumps of clay.

"Drink, mates, drink as much as you like.

I've got money and clothes. Enough to last us three days. We'll drink it all away and—to hell! I don't want to work here any more, and I don't want to live here any more either."

"A rotten town," put in someone who looked like John Falstaff.

"Work?" queried another, gazing at the ceiling and adding in a tone of wonder, "Is that what a man was born for?"

And they all began to gabble at once, proving to Konovalov that he had a perfect right to drink, and that he was even *obliged* to drink, since it was with them he was drinking.

"Ho, Maxim, full of steam," he jingled on catching sight of me. "Come, you bookworm, you hypocrite—have a swig. I've jumped the rails for good, pal. To hell! I want to get soaked to the roots of my hair. I'll stop when there's nothing left but hair. Come on, join in."

He was not yet completely drunk. His blue eyes flashed with excitement and the handsome beard covering his chest like a silken fan quivered from the nervous trembling of his lower jaw. The collar of his shirt was open, tiny drops of sweat glistened on his white

brow, and the hand with which he held out a glass of beer to me was shaking.

"Drop it, Sasha, let's get out of here," I said, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"Drop it?" he laughed. "If you had said that ten years ago, I might have dropped it. But not now. What else am I to do? I'm aware of everything, every single thing, the least little movement, but I don't understand a thing and I don't know what I ought to do. I'm aware of everything, I tell you, and so I drink, because there's nothing else for me to do. Here, have a drink!"

His companions eyed me with obvious displeasure, all twelve eyes measuring me hostilely from head to foot.

The poor creatures were afraid I would take Konovalov away and deprive them of a treat they had been waiting for.

"This is my pal, mates, a learned fellow, God damn him. Maxim, could you read about Stenka here? What books there are, brothers! Or about Pila. How about it, Maxim? Blood and tears, brothers. That Pila—he was me, wasn't he, Maxim? And so was Sysoika. Honest to God. There's your explanation for you!"

He looked at me with wide-open eyes charged with fear, and his lower jaw trembled queerly. His companions reluctantly made a place for me at the table. I sat down next to Konovalov just as he picked up a glass filled with beer and vodka, half and half.

His one idea seemed to be to extinguish himself with this mixture as quickly as possible. When he had swallowed it, he took up a piece of what looked like clay but really was boiled meat, stared at it a moment, then tossed it against the wall of the pub.

His companions let out a low growl, like a pack of hungry wolves.

"I'm a lost soul. Why did my mother ever bring me into the world? Nobody knows. Dark. Crowded. Farewell, Maxim, if you don't want to have a drink with me. I'm not going back to the bakery. The boss owes me some money. Collect and bring it here. I'll drink it. Or no, take it and buy yourself books. Will you? Don't want to? Don't have to. Or maybe you will? You're a pig if you don't. Get away from me. Get away, I tell you!"

As he got drunk his eyes took on a hostile glitter.

His companions were quite ready to throw me out by the scruff of the neck, so I left before they had a chance.

Three hours later I was back in "The Wall." Konovalov's companions had increased by two. All of them were drunk—he less than the others. He was singing, his elbows on the table, his eyes fixed on the sky glimpsed through the hole in the ceiling. The drunkards had assumed various poses as they listened to him, and some of them were hiccuping.

Konovalov had a baritone voice and took his high notes in a falsetto, as do all workmen when they sing. With deep feeling he poured out his mournful roulades, cheek in hand, eyes half closed, Adam's apple protruding. Eight blank inebriate physiognomies were turned to him, and the only sounds that came from them were occasional mutterings or hiccups. Konovalov's voice sobbed, moaned, vibrated tenderly. It was enough to break one's heart to hear that fine fellow singing so mournfully.

The stifling odours, the drunken sweaty faces, the two smoking oil lamps, the dirty soot-blackened walls, the earthen floor, the

gloomy shadows—all of this was unwholesome and depressing. It was as if a gruesome feast were being held by men buried alive in some catacomb, and as if one of them were singing for the last time before he died, saying farewell to the sky. My friend's song was filled with hopeless sorrow, calm despair, and inconsolable longing.

"Maxim here? Want to be my batman?" he interrupted his singing to say, holding out his hand to me. "I've got everything ready, pal. Collected a band—here are my men—and we'll find some more. Oh, yes we will. That won't be hard. And we'll invite Pila and Sysoika; feed them with meat and porridge every day, won't we? Is it a go? Bring some books with you. You'll read to us about Stenka and others. Oh, pal, I'm sick of it all! Sick—of—it—all!"

He brought his fist down hard on the table. The bottles and glasses clattered and his companions, instantly sitting up, filled the pub with a dreadful clamour.

"Drink, fellows!" shouted Konovalov. "Drink away your troubles! Swill it down!"

I went out and stood in the entrance listen-

ing to Konovalov's drunken raving, and when he began to sing again I went back to the bakery, pursued by the sounds of the drunken song, which groaned and sobbed for long in the silence of the night.

Two days later Konovalov disappeared.

One has to be born into cultivated society to be able to live in it all one's life without longing to escape from the oppressive conventions sanctioned by the small insidious lies that have become habitual; from the unwholesome conceit, sectarianism, hypocrisy of that society; in a word, from a vanity of vanities that dulls the senses and corrupts the mind. I was born and reared outside of it, and thanks to this favourable circumstance I am unable to take big doses of civilization without feeling the necessity of breaking out of its bounds from time to time and finding relief from its over-complexity and unwholesome refinement.

Village life is almost as sad and insufferable as life among the intelligentsia. The best thing to do at such times is to go among the city slums, where, in spite of the dirt,

life is very simple and sincere. Or to strike out down the roads and across the fields of your native land—an adventure that is greatly refreshing and demands no resources but a pair of sturdy legs.

Five years ago I set out on such an adventure, and my wanderings over holy Russ brought me at last to Feodosiya. At that time the construction of the breakwater had just begun, and I turned my steps in that direction in the hope of earning a little money.

I wished first to contemplate the building site as one might a picture, and so I climbed a hill and gazed down on the mighty sea stretching as far as the eye reached, and on the minute creatures that were harnessing it.

It was a vast picture of human labour that I beheld. The whole rocky shore was dug up, pitted, covered with piles of stone and brush, with barrows, logs, iron bars, pile-drivers, mechanical appliances, and in and out of all this scurried the workmen. One of the hills had been blown up with dynamite, and now the men were chopping

it up with picks to clear the way for a railway line. Cement was being mixed in huge containers and moulded into six-foot blocks that were lowered into the sea to form a bulwark against the titanic force of the tide. The people looked as small as maggots against the background of the brown hill, and like maggots they wriggled in the scorching heat of this southern sun, among the heaps of crushed rock and piles of timber seen dimly through clouds of stone-dust. The chaos about them and the white-hot sky above them suggested that they were digging themselves into the hill, seeking shelter in its bowels from the heat of the sun and the desolation all around.

The oppressive air was filled with the hum and throb of work: the ring of picks against stone, the squeaking of barrow-wheels, the dull thud of falling pile-drivers, the wail of the workers' song "Dubinushka," the chip-chop of the hatchets barking the logs, and the many-toned cries of the drab human forms animating the scene.

In one place workmen were grunting loudly as they tried to push away a great piece of

rock; in another they were lifting an enormous log, shouting in unison:

"One, two—heave!"

The gashed hillside gave back a blurred echo of their cries.

Along the broken segments of a board walk moved a slow procession of men bent double over barrows loaded with stones, while from the opposite direction came a procession with empty barrows, moving even more slowly, that they might stretch one moment's rest out to two. A motley crowd stood about the pile-driver, and from their midst came a tenor voice singing:

Ekh, mates, it's hellish hot,
Ekh, mates, it's a hellish lot!
O-i-i-i, du-u-binushka,
One, two, and heave!

A low roar came from the men pulling on the rope, the metal cylinder slid quickly to the top of the shaft, then fell with a dull thud, sending a shudder through the pile-driver.

Little grey people were swarming all over the ground between the hill and the sea,

filling the air with dust, cries, and the sourish smell of sweat. Among them moved their bosses in white duck coats with brass buttons that flashed in the sunlight like cold yellow eyes.

The sea stretched calmly to the misty horizon and its transparent waves broke quietly on the seething shore. As it sparkled in the sunlight it seemed to be smiling the condescending smile of a Gulliver who knows that with a single movement he can destroy the fruits of the labour of these Lilliputs if he so desires.

There it lay, glittering blindingly—vast and strong and kindly, sending forth a cooling breath to refresh the exhausted people labouring to curb the freedom of its waves, which were now lapping the mutilated shore so meekly. It seemed to feel sorry for these people. In the course of the centuries it had learned that those who labour are not the ones who harbour evil designs against it; they are mere slaves, assigned the role of battling with the elements, and in this battle the elements are sure to wreak vengeance upon them. They do nothing but labour,

they are for ever building something, their sweat and blood is the cement of all structures on our earth; yet they themselves get nothing for this, even though all their strength is poured into the eternal aspiration to build something, an aspiration which has wrought miracles on earth, but has not given men roofs over their heads or enough food for their bodies. These men themselves are one of the elements, and that is why the sea looks kindly rather than wrathfully upon their unprofitable labour. Those little grey maggots boring into the hillside were as the drops of water which the sea hurls against the cold implacable cliffs in its eternal aspiration to enlarge its bounds. It is they which are the first to perish from the impact. The sum of these drops is something akin to the sea, is in no way different from it—just as powerful, just as given to destruction when touched by the breath of the storm. In ancient times the sea had knowledge of the slaves who built the pyramids in the desert, and of the slaves of Xerxes, that ridiculous ruler who gave the sea three hundred lashes as punishment for washing away

his toy-like bridges. Slaves have been the same at all times, they have always been subordinate, they have always been ill fed, they have always done great and miraculous tasks, sometimes deifying those who drove them to work, more often cursing them, occasionally rising in revolt against their rulers.

. . . Quietly the waves ran up on the shore where all these people were building a stone barrier against their constant movement, and as they ran they sang a tender song about the past, about all they had seen, century after century, on the shores of this land.

Among the workmen were lean bronzed figures in red turbans or fezzes, in short blue jackets, and in short baggy trousers drawn in tight at the knee. These, as I learned later, were Turks from Anatolia. Their guttural speech mingled with the slow long-drawn speech of Russians from Vyatka, with the terse, quick phrases of Volga-men and the soft inflexions of Ukrainians.

There was famine in Russia, and the famine had driven people here from almost all the affected regions. In their effort to be with

their own countrymen they formed little groups, but the cosmopolitan tramps with their independent bearing and peculiarities of dress and speech were easily distinguished from those who still had roots in native soil, who had not forgotten the land and had only left it for a while, under stress of hunger. Tramps were to be found in every group —mingling as easily with men from Vyatka as with Ukrainians, and everywhere making themselves at home. But most of them had gathered round the pile-driver, since it was easier to work there than with picks or barrows.

When I came up to them the workmen were standing with the rope hanging loose in their hands, waiting for the foreman to free the pulley from some hemp which was "jamming" it. He fussed about in the little wooden tower, calling down from time to time:

"Give it a jerk."

And they would jerk the rope half-heartedly.

"Stop! Jerk it again. Stop! Try again!"

The soloist—an unshaven youth with a pock-marked face and soldierly bearing—

squared his shoulders, glanced off to one side, cleared his throat, and began:

The driver pounds her into the ground . . .

The lines which followed could not have been passed by the most lenient of censors. They had evidently been made up on the spur of the moment by the singer himself and called forth a loud guffaw, to which their author responded by twisting his moustache in the manner of a performer who is used to applause.

"Nothing else to do?" shouted down the foreman furiously. "Braying like the asses you are!"

"You'll burst a blood vessel, Mitrich!" replied one of the workmen.

The voice was familiar and I seemed to have seen that tall broad-shouldered frame, that oval face and those blue eyes somewhere before. Could it be Konovalov? But Konovalov had not had the scar that cleaved this chap's forehead from his left temple to the bridge of his nose. And Konovalov's hair had been lighter and less curly. And Konovalov had had a handsome beard, while this young man had a clean-shaven chin and

a long moustache with trailing ends such as Ukrainians wear. But even so there was something strikingly familiar about him. I decided to ask him where I should go to apply for a job, but I waited until the pile was driven in.

"A-a-umph! A-a-a-umph!" grunted the workmen as they squatted, pulling hard on the rope, then leaped into the air as if taking wing. The pile-driver squeaked and shook; hairy brown arms stretched up to the ropes over the heads of the people, biceps stood out in great knots, yet the forty-pood iron hammer kept falling shorter and shorter of maximum height and its blows on the pile grew weaker and weaker. Anyone watching the scene might have thought these men were idol-worshippers, who, in ecstasy and despair, were lifting their arms and bowing before their silent god. The air was filled with hot vapours that rose from their dirty sweaty faces with dishevelled hair plastered to wet foreheads, from their brown necks and twitching shoulders, from their bodies that were only half clad in rags of every description. And these bodies merged

to form a solid mass of muscles that writhed in the humid air throbbing with the heat of the south, saturated with the smell of sweat.

"Time's up!" someone shouted in a hoarse rough voice.

The workmen's hands relaxed and the ropes fell limply about the pile-driver. The men slumped down on to the ground, wiping the sweat from their faces, taking deep breaths of air, easing their backs, feeling their shoulders and filling the air with a low mutter like the growl of an angry beast.

"Friend," said I to the man in question.

He turned to me slowly, let his eyes slide over my face, then narrowed them and gazed at me fixedly.

"Konovalov!"

"Wait." He tipped back my head as if about to lay hands on my throat, then suddenly a joyful smile lighted his face.

"Maxim! Think of that now! Old pal! So you've cut the traces, too, have you? Joined us tramps? Good for you. When did you do it? Where have you come from? You and I'll roam all over the earth together. That was no life for us, that other life. Noth-

ing but misery and a lot of trouble. A sure way to rot to death. I've been on the road ever since I left you. The places I've seen! The air I've breathed! But look at you, the way you've got yourself up. I'd never have known you. Clothes of a soldier, face of a student. Well, how do you like living like this, from place to place? Don't think I've forgotten about Stenka—or Taras or Pila—I remember them all."

He poked me in the side with his finger, clapped me on the shoulder with a broad palm. Unable to get a word in edgewise, I just stood and smiled and looked into his kindly face, now radiant with the joy of this reunion. I, too, was glad to see him, extremely glad. I was reminded of how I had made my start in life, and the start was unquestionably better than what followed.

In the end I managed to ask my old friend how he had come by the scar on his forehead and the light curls on his head.

"Oh, those? This is how. Two of my pals and I thought we'd cross the Rumanian border—wanted to see what things were like in Rumania. We set out from Kagula—a

place in Bessarabia at the very border. We're making our way—at night, of course—very quietly, and all of a sudden 'Halt!' The customs guards. We'd run straight into them. We took to our heels, and one of those soldier-boys caught me on the head. Not much of a tap, it wasn't, but it kept me in hospital for a month. And just think, the soldier turned out to be from my own town! One of our boys from Murom! He was put in hospital, too, soon after that—a smuggler knifed him in the belly. When we were feeling better we put two and two together. 'Am I the one smashed your cap for you?' that soldier asks me. 'Must've been you, once you admit it,' I says. 'You're right, must've been me,' he says, 'but don't hold it against me. That's my job. We thought you were hauling contraband. See, I got it, too—they slit my belly open for me. Can't be helped. Life's nothing to sneeze at.' He and I became great friends—a fine fellow he was; Yashka Mazin. As for the curls—the curls came from typhoid. I had typhoid. They put me in jail in Kishinev for trying to slip across the border, and there I caught

a fine case of typhoid. It kept me on my back so long I thought I'd never get up. And I probably never would have if one of the nurses hadn't taken such good care of me. It's a miracle how I ever pulled through. She watched over me as if I was a baby. I don't know why. I meant nothing to her. 'Drop it, Maria Petrovna,' I'd say. 'I'm ashamed to have you making such a fuss over me.' But she'd just laugh at me. She had a kind heart. Sometimes she'd read me something for the salvation of my soul. 'Couldn't you find something—something different to read?' I asked her once. So she brought a book about an English sailor who got shipwrecked on a desert island and set up housekeeping there. There's an interesting book for you! I was mad on that book; wanted like hell to join him on that island. What a life! The island, the sea, the sky, and you all by yourself, with everything you need, free as a bird! He found a savage to live with him. I'd have drowned the savage, what the hell would I need him for? I'd have got on fine all by myself. Did you ever read that book?"

"But tell me how you got out of jail."

"They let me out. Held a trial, found me innocent and let me out. Very simple. But look, I'm not going to work any more today, what the hell! I've got enough blisters on my hands. And I've got three rubles, and I'll get another forty kopeks for this morning. Not bad, eh? So you come and spend the day with us—we don't live in the barracks but on a hill not far from here. Found a hole very suitable to live in. Another fellow and I share it, but he's sick—got the fever. Wait here while I run to the foreman, it won't take me a minute."

He got up quickly and walked away just as the workmen picked up the ropes of the pile-driver to start work again. I went on sitting there watching the noisy movement all about me and the calm blue-green sea.

The tall form of Konovalov darted in and out among the people, the barrows, the piles of stone and logs. On he went, swinging his arms, clad in a blue cotton shirt that was too short and tight for him, in coarse linen trousers and heavy boots. Now and again he would look back and sign to me

with his hands. I found him different, very strong and lively and filled with calm confidence in himself. Work was in full swing all about him: logs were being split and stones crushed; the barrows creaked drearily, clouds of dust rose into the air, something crashed to earth, people grunted, shouted, swore, and sang in moaning tones.

The handsome form of my friend retreating with such a firm step stood out in sharp contrast to this turmoil of sound and movement and suggested an answer to the enigma of Konovalov.

Two hours later he and I were lying in the "hole very suitable to live in." And very suitable it was. At some former time rock had been hewn from the hillside, leaving a large square cave in which four people could live comfortably. But it was very low, and a big boulder hung down over the entrance, so that the only way to get in was to crawl in on one's stomach. It was seven feet deep, but there was no need to go inside, and indeed it would have been dangerous to do so, for the boulder might have crashed down and buried us alive. For fear of this

we disposed ourselves in the following way: we thrust our legs and bodies into the hole, which was very cool, and kept our heads outside, so that if the boulder should fall it would crush our skulls.

The ailing tramp had crawled out into the sun and was lying close enough for us to hear his teeth chatter whenever he was seized by a chill. He was a long lanky Ukrainian from Poltava, as he told me dreamily.

He rolled on the ground in his efforts to wrap himself up in a grey garment made mostly of holes; he swore very picturesquely when his efforts proved in vain, but did not abandon either his efforts or his swearing. He had little black eyes that were always narrowed as if he were constantly scrutinizing something.

The sun beat down mercilessly on the backs of our heads. Konovalov took my army coat and made a sort of tent by stretching it over some sticks that he stuck in the ground. From the distance came the sound of the work going on in the bay, but we could not see it. On the shore to our right stood lumpish white houses constituting a town;

to our left and in front of us was the sea receding far, far into the distance where wondrously delicate colours, soothing the eye and the spirit by the elusive beauty of their shades, merged in the soft half-tones of a fantastic mirage.

As Konovalov watched them, a blissful smile stole over his face, and he said to me:

"When the sun goes down we'll make a fire and get tea; we have some bread and meat. Want some water-melon?"

He rolled a water-melon out of a hole with his foot, took a knife out of his pocket and said, as he cut up the melon:

"Every time I find myself by the sea I wonder why so few people settle here. They'd be the better for it because the sea's so—so gentle. It makes you think good thoughts. Well, tell me what you've been doing the last few years."

I began to tell him. In the distance the sea had already become tinged with crimson and gold, and pink and mauve clouds rose to meet the sun. It was as if mountains with snow-capped peaks flushed by the rays of the setting sun were emerging out of the sea.

"Too bad you've been living in towns, Maxim," said Konovalov very definitely when I had given my account. "What draws you to them? A stuffy life. No air, no space, nothing a man needs. People? There are people everywhere. Books? Enough of reading books! Is that what you were born for? Books are the bunk. Buy yourself one if you must, put it in your sack, and set out. Want to go to Tashkent with me? Or to Samarkand, or some other place? We'll stay there a while and then head for the Amur. I've decided to go everywhere—that's the only thing to do. Then you'll always see something new. And won't waste your time thinking. Just walk ahead with the wind in your face blowing all sorts of dirt out of your soul. Free and light-hearted. No one to boss you. If you're hungry, call a halt and do a fifty-kopek job, or if there's no job, beg a crust of bread—you'll always get it. At least you'll see something of the world. Some of its beauty. Want to join me?"

The sun slipped down over the horizon. The clouds grew darker, as did the sea, and the air became cool. Here and there a star

came out, the hum of work ceased in the bay, but from time to time we heard the sound of voices, soft as a sigh. And the wind wafted to our ears the melancholy murmur of the waves washing the beach.

Quickly the darkness deepened and the form of the Ukrainian, which had been very distinct five minutes earlier, was now only a vague mass.

"What about a fire?" he said with a cough.

"I'll make it."

Konovalov produced a heap of shavings and set a match to them. Thin tongues of flame began to lick the yellow resinous wood. A ribbon of smoke wound up into the night air, which was cool and damp from the sea. It grew more and more quiet, as if life were withdrawing from us, its sounds fading in the darkness. The clouds dispersed, the stars shone brightly in the dark blue sky, and on the velvety surface of the sea appeared the lights of fishing boats and the reflection of the stars. The fire in front of us blossomed forth like a huge red-and-yellow flower. When Konovalov had hung the tea-kettle over it, he clasped his knees in his hands

and gazed contemplatively into the flames. The Ukrainian crawled nearer, like a huge lizard.

"People build towns and houses, they huddle together in crowds, foul the land, suffocate, get in each other's way. A hell of a life! This is the only life—the one we're leading."

"H'm-m," said the Ukrainian with a shake of his head. "If you threw in a sheepskin and a warm house for the winter, then you might say we live like lords." He narrowed one eye on Konovalov and gave a little laugh.

"Y-e-s," admitted Konovalov, "winter's a deuce of a time. Towns really are needed in the winter, no denying that. But even so there's no excuse for having big towns. Why live in herds when it's hard enough for even two or three people to get along together? That's what I mean. When you come to think of it, there's really no place fit for a man to live in—not the town or the steppe or anywhere else. But it's better not to think about such things—can't do anything about it, just spoil your humour."

I had been under the impression that Konovalov's vagabond life had changed him, that the air of freedom he had been breathing for the last few years had enabled him to shed those barnacles of misery that had clung to his heart; but from the tone in which he said this I realized he was still the man I had known, the man "searching for something to hang on to." His powerful body, unfortunately born with too tender a heart in it, was still being destroyed by the corrosion of bewilderment, the poison of pondering life. There are many such "contemplative" people in Russia, and they are always more unhappy than anybody else, because the burden of their thoughts is made heavier by the ignorance of their minds. I gazed with compassion at my friend and he, as if in confirmation of my conclusion, exclaimed unhappily:

"I often think about how we lived together, you and me, Maxim, and about—about everything that happened then. How many places I've been to since, and how many things I've seen! And yet there's no place on this earth where I fit in. I just can't find a place for myself."

"That's what you get for being born with a neck no yoke will fit," said the Ukrainian unfeelingly as he took the boiling kettle off the fire.

"Tell me why I can't settle down?" returned Konovalov. "Why is it that most people live normal enough, tend to business, have wives and children and all the rest, and are always anxious to do something or other? And I can't. I just can't. Why can't I?"

"The way you whine!" exclaimed the Ukrainian in surprise. "As if whining ever made things easier!"

"You're right," said Konovalov cheerlessly.

"I'm sparing of words, but I always know what to say," said the Stoic with a sense of his own worth as he went on fighting the fever.

He coughed, shifted his position, and spat furiously into the fire. Everything around us was blotted out, hidden by thick curtains of darkness. The sky, too, was dark, for the moon had not yet risen. We sensed the sea rather than saw it, so intense was the darkness. It was as if a black fog had settled down over the earth. The fire went out.

"Let's turn in," suggested the Ukrainian.

We crawled into the "hole," keeping our heads outside. We did not speak. Konovalov lay without stirring, as if he were under a spell. The Ukrainian tossed from side to side and his teeth chattered. For a long time I kept my eyes fixed on the glow of the dying fire; at first the coals were large and bright, then they grew smaller and became coated with ash, which finally extinguished them. Soon there was nothing left of the fire but its warm breath. I watched it and thought: "Each of us is like that. But oh! to burn brightly for the moment!"

Three days later I took my leave of Konovalov. I went on to the Kuban; he did not wish to join me. We parted certain we would meet again.

But we never did.

1897

VANKA MAZIN

He had an elongated skull, somewhat sunken on either side; large flapping ears; a sallow and apathetic face with sprouts of red whiskers on cheek-bones and sharp chin; immobile colourless eyes that protruded in a melancholy manner; a long nose; a pendulous lower lip; a large mouth that always hung half-open; a scrawny neck, all knotted and corded; sagging shoulders; a hollow chest; a stomach that stuck out like that of a pregnant woman; a left arm noticeably shorter than the right; legs curved out like the two halves of a wheel. All this was crowned by a faded cap with a broken peak and a black patch in the middle; being too big for the head, it was kept from slipping down over

the eyes by being hooked on to the left ear and held by tufts of thick yellow hair which had become so matted and glued together by dirt that it was like felt. A Russian blouse all patched and mended flapped about this incongruous frame in a particularly unappetizing way; the trousers were too big for the skinny legs, the leg-wrappings ragged, the *lapti* disreputable. This, then, is an exact portrait of Vanka Mazin, carpenter from Vyatka, whom Nature seemed to have created with the express purpose of presenting mankind with an embodiment of preposterous form, and of affording amusement to all who beheld it.

The latter purpose Vanka Mazin served with distinction. Whenever his fellow-workmen caught sight of him, they would nod in his direction and exclaim jubilantly:

"Here comes the devil's coach!"

I have never seen the devil's coach, but whenever I watched Mazin approach it seemed to me he had no gristle in his body, and that was what made him walk so queerly: before putting down a foot, he would waggle it to right and left as if feeling for a more

level spot to make the going easier; his arms hung limply on either side of his stooped, unstrung trunk; his head fought a losing battle with a cap that kept slipping down over his eyes; his nose sniffed and snorted; the tool-box hanging on his back came riding round under his arm. Despite all these distractions, Mazin's melancholy eyes remained fixed on some point in the distance as if they lived a life apart from that of his disorganized body.

He had the comic habit of humming a tune to himself—a tune without words and apparently without beginning or end. And as he came along, humming and sniffing, he really did suggest a squeaky old coach that had lost all its nuts and bolts in the course of long years of service.

They called him "Old Slipshod," and "The Mosquito," and anything else that came into their heads. One epithet fitted him as well as another, and none of them seemed to offend him, for he would reply to any name.

"What d'ye want?" he would say in his wheezy, listless voice.

According to his passport he was forty-seven years old, but even the young lads called him Vanka; almost never was he addressed by his last name. He did not mind this any more than he minded the nicknames he was given, for he was profoundly indifferent to the opinion of his comrades. He loved solitude and was able to be alone in the midst of a crowd. When his fellow-workers went to the tavern for tea on Sundays and holidays, he would join them if he were asked, but he remained as taciturn and melancholy as ever as he sat over his tea or his bottle of vodka. And yet it would be a mistake to call him unsociable. He more nearly resembled a person deeply cogitating some insoluble problem; a person mentally unbalanced. When first he joined this group of carpenters, his habit of staring with eyes that seemed to see through walls and people led Grandad Ossip, master carpenter and the Nestor of the guild, to make the following observation:

"There's something wrong with that Vyatka fellow. He seems to be touched. His eyes don't shine. Dead eyes. There's something

wrong with him. Either life's been too much for him, or he's got something on his conscience. In a word: a bad conscience. Smudged, so to speak. A man's eyes go dead from a thing like that; the smudge on his soul falls on his eyes. If a man's got roving eyes, that's bad, too. That means his soul's uneasy —he's got something on his mind or his conscience. And dead eyes are no good. If a man's clean and upright, his eyes are straight —they look straight at everything with a shine and a sparkle. In other words, watch that Vyatka fellow. He's unknown to us as yet."

And so all the members of the guild began to watch the behaviour of the man with the dead eyes, and the first thing they noticed was that he was a very bad workman. He knew his trade, but the axe, the saw and the plane did not obey his skinny arms and hands. It was as if the metal had absorbed the man's apathy and did not have the same proud strength that rang out when worked by other hands. Sometimes Mazin would stop in the middle of a job and gaze at his tool in silence, evidently reflecting on something.

"Hey, you fly-catcher! Falling asleep?" the foreman would shout at him.

Without a word Mazin would resume his work.

"He's not the hurrying kind," the others would laugh sarcastically.

"Why should I hurry?" asked Vanka Mazin seriously, looking at his comrades in expectation of an answer. They only laughed and made fun of him, but his indifference made him invulnerable to their jibes and coarse sallies.

They did not like him. He was the only man from Vyatka among these Nizhny Novgorod carpenters. He was a poor companion —dull, lazy, a bad mixer. But while they made fun of him, they kept their teasing within bounds, for they knew that, broken bone that he was, his strength was to be reckoned with. And this is how they found that out.

One day six workmen were carrying a heavy beam. Mazin was holding one end of it.

"Keep in step!" the ones in front shouted to him. But Mazin's bow legs could not keep in step, and so the beam "bumped."

"Walk even, you bandy-legged bastard!"

He puffed and grunted in the effort to adjust his step to that of his comrades, but the beam only "bumped" the more.

"You damned kangaroo!" bawled hefty Yakov Laptev, a man known for his strength. And with that he struck Mazin on the backside with a heavy pole. Mazin let out a grunt, but went on without a word. When they had put down the beam, he went back to where Yakov was working and halted in front of him.

"What did you hit me for?" he asked calmly.

"Get along!" shouted Yakov.

"Are you a boss, that you think you can go hitting people?" asked Mazin.

"Get along, I tell you. I'd step on you, you louse, if I thought you was worth it."

"What for?" asked Mazin.

"Give him one in the jaw, Yakov. He's asking for it," said somebody. Yakov took the advice, swung his arm, and—found himself stretched out on the ground by a precise blow administered by Mazin.

The men were dumbstruck. People always

feel respect for strength, in whatever form it is manifested. Yakov had enjoyed the reputation of being the Hercules among them and he did not intend to yield it to this Vyatka fellow without a struggle. He got up off the ground and rolled up his sleeves.

"Come on, I'm going to break a few ribs for you," he warned Mazin.

"Well—" said Mazin dubiously.

"Stand off, fellows, don't interfere!" ordered Grandad Ossip. "Hands off! Let them fight it out. Fair enough. Go to it, men, but up and above board. No tricks. God bless you! Bang! Ouch!"

Mazin got that "bang" in his left side, but Yakov was gathering himself up off the ground again and staring at his opponent with redoubled fury. Mazin stood waiting for him, breathing heavily and rubbing his injured side with his left hand. Yakov rushed at him frenziedly; Mazin calmly swung his long right arm and knocked him down by striking him on the head with a blow from above. To a bystander it looked as if he were driving nails into Yakov's head. Seven

times Yakov measured his length on the ground, and the last time he did not bother to get up—just lay there cursing Mazin.

"You damned little runt! What d'ye have to hit me on the head for? Aren't there no other places on my body, you lopsided scarecrow? A scarecrow, that's what you are—can't even fight like a human being."

The other men had to admit that Mazin was strong, but they said he did not know how to fight. Mazin delivered a speech to his vanquished foe.

"Now you know what it means to pick a fight!" he said, shaking his fist over his head. "This is what it means! And you'd have got it worse if I hadn't took pity on you. Next time don't be in such a hurry. As for your head—a little cold water and it'll be all right. Won't hurt too much. Go and wet it." And he turned on his heel and walked away, humming as usual his endless tune.

"A devil if there ever was one," concluded the carpenters, astounded by what had happened. Yakov was so big, broad-shouldered and jolly, while that other chap really was a runt.

"See that?" said Grandad Ossip. "A good lesson that Vyatka fellow's taught us. He's got a heart, that man. The Lord's been hard on him, no doubt about that, but what he said to Yakov was right. Don't be too free with your fists; don't pick a fight. We're all God's creatures. Why jump at each other without good reason? And he did right: gave Yakov the beating he deserved and then says to him: 'Go and put some cold water on your head.' Very sensible. So there's your Vyatka fellow for you! And mark my word—that's not the last lesson he'll teach us!"

"We ought to throw him out," said the men.

"He's not our kind, that's true," said Grandad Ossip thoughtfully. "What do you suppose makes him like that? But throw him out? Not yet. Wait a bit. Maybe he'll change—maybe he'll come to fit in."

"He don't do us any good," said the others.

"He's lazy and he don't know how to work, no doubt about that. But after all, he's got to eat and drink and pay his taxes like the rest of us. Right? And he's a peasant; how can we throw him out? If we throw

him out and others throw him out, how's he to earn his food and drink?"

Since no further objections were made, Vanka Mazin was not thrown out. At first they waited for him to adjust himself to them, then they adjusted themselves to him, and while they looked upon him as the worst of them all, both as man and workman, and while they still made fun of him, sometimes very cruelly, they never again raised the question of throwing him out. They got used to his slow but thorough work, for which he got two rubles a week and free meals.

He was the black sheep in a very small human flock. Every human flock must have its black sheep whose shortcomings throw in relief the virtues of the white; otherwise the virtues would be ill-perceived—might even pass unnoticed.

One day the workmen were extending the scaffolding to the top story of the four-story house they were building for a rich merchant named Smurov.

At the dinner hour the contractor himself appeared on the scene. Zakhar Ivanovich Kolobov was a fat man with a red face and

a big red beard combed painstakingly. His sharp grey eyes took in everything at a glance; he instantly saw how many workmen were on the job and that Vanka Mazin was taking a long time to carry a plank up the scaffolding.

"Hey, you bedbug!" he shouted irately. "Crawl faster! Ugh, you confounded idiot!"

Seeing that their boss was in a bad humour, the carpenters redoubled their efforts, but this, of course, made no difference, because the contractor swore not because there was any cause for swearing, but because he enjoyed it.

"Didn't I tell you, you blockheads, not to take new planks for the scaffolding, not to saw up new wood? Use up the old stuff!"

"The old ones are pretty well worn, Zakhar Ivanovich," said Yakov Laptev obsequiously.

"What do you know about it, snout-face?" roared Kolobov.

For half an hour he put the fear of God into their hearts, and when at last they went to have their dinner, he gingerly climbed the scaffolding.

"Old bark-belly," muttered Grandad Ossip.

"The bloated bastard," added Yakov.

The other workmen added their comments, but Mazin said nothing as he languidly gathered up his tools.

"Come along," said Grandad to the men who were standing round him. "What're you waiting for? For him to come down and bark at us again?"

By this time Kolobov had reached the third story of the scaffolding where he stood testing the planks with his foot and the uprights with his hand. The squeaking of his boots could be heard when he tried the planks. The carpenters shot sidelong glances at him and then moved off in a group to have their dinner.

At that moment there was a creaking sound—the creak of a nail being pulled out of a board—and the sound of a plank splitting. Ossip turned round.

"Mates!" he cried, giving an odd little jump.

Simultaneously with his cry came the sound of wood cracking and splintering, the crash of falling boards, and a wild shout:

"Help!"

The carpenters froze in their tracks. The scaffolding was falling. The uprights slowly, deliberately drew away from the wall as if pushing themselves away. Boards, laths and bricks fell to the ground in a cloud of dust, and out of the confusion came the frantic cries of Kolobov:

"Help! He-e-elp!"

The timber splintered and crashed while the carpenters stood where they were and gazed blankly at the disruption of their work. In spite of the urgings of Grandad Ossip they were afraid to go near.

"I told you, mates, to put some nails in those boards. You didn't listen to me and you've been the cause of a man's ruin. He's done for. Good God, what are you standing and gaping at? Do something, you bastards! Go and pull him out. Go, I tell you!"

"What's all the excitement about?" said Yakov glumly. "It's not our fault. He's the one said not to touch the new boards."

"There weren't enough nails. He didn't give us enough," said somebody else.

"Are we to blame for that?" grumbled another.

"And are we to let him get killed for that? Killed, I tell you!"

Grandad Ossip, his face red with excitement, rushed about pushing and pulling the men with shaking hands.

And the scaffolding teetered away from the wall, one section after another. Boards and bricks came hurtling off the planks, a tub fell and rolled over the ground, lime was spilled, sending up clouds of white dust. No longer were the cries of Kolobov to be heard.

"I'll go and have a look," said Mazin, gazing thoughtfully into the clouds of dust. And he went.

"Don't go! You'll get killed!" they shouted after him.

"Leave him alone! Go ahead, Vanka; go ahead, friend; go in the name of the Lord."

But he went without any urging. He walked as slowly as ever, rocking from side to side on his bow legs.

By this time a large noisy crowd had gathered, in the midst of which two police-

men made a great deal of commotion doing nothing. The clouds of lime subsided, revealing the stark remains of the scaffolding. Boards and laths were sticking out everywhere, some of them still swinging as if making up their minds whether to fall or not.

One board sticking out of a window swayed harder than the others because Kolobov was lying on the end of it. There he hung in mid-air, clinging to the board with hands and feet, his head and stomach pressed flat against it. The other end was supported by the window frame and held fast by a pile of lumber that had fallen on it. But it might snap in two, or the strength of the man hanging on to it might give out, and in either case he would plunge down on to the bristling wreckage below from a height of three stories. At present he lay without stirring or making a sound, as if he had grown fast to the board.

There was a brief hush when the crowd caught sight of him, and then with redoubled force people gave vent to emotions running from horror to curiosity. After that they offered advice.

"Hold out a tarpaulin and let him jump down into it."

"What if he's unconscious?"

"Go inside the house and pull the board through the window."

"It'd break."

"Put a pole under it."

"Where would you get a pole that long?"

"Look! Look!"

Mazin was standing at the window with a rope in his hands, and he must have been saying something, for his lips were moving. A hush fell over the crowd.

"Zakhar Ivanovich! Hear me? I'm going to throw you a rope, and you slip the loop round the end of the board. Hear me? Catch it."

One end of the rope flew into the air and fell on the body of Kolobov. Slowly, barely perceptibly, he moved. The board swayed. A groan was heard.

"Don't be afraid, Ivanovich! Say a prayer and do as you're told. The Lord wouldn't let you die without repenting," shouted Grandad Ossip from below. Others in the crowd added encouragements, and after pro-

tracted efforts the contractor slipped the loop over the end of the board.

"Now lie still," said Mazin, and disappeared. A minute later the rope was drawn tight and the end of the board began to rise slowly.

"Good for you, Vanka!" shouted Grandad Ossip when he had guessed Mazin's intention. "Go and help him, you lumps! Good for Mazin! Go and help him, mates!"

Several men rushed into the house, and soon the end was raised so high that the board sloped gently down into the window. At that point Mazin appeared again.

"Now slide down on your belly, Zakhar Ivanovich. Easy-like. The board'll hold, it's a good thick one. Come on, like a crab."

And although the danger was not yet over, for the board might still snap, the crowd began to laugh. Kolobov, covered with dust, his mouth wide-open, his face livid, his eyes frenzied, was crawling down the board on his stomach, and the sight could hardly have been called tragic.

As he cautiously slid his hands down the board, he would hunch his ponderous body

into a ball one minute and stretch it out flat the next. His feet kept slipping off and dangling in the air; sometimes the board would sway. Whenever this happened, he froze on the spot, clung to the board for all he was worth and bleated plaintively. This made the people laugh all the harder, and the closer he got to the window, the louder the laughter grew.

"I'll bet he's got splinters in his belly," sang out a red-headed house-painter.

"He'll eat with an appetite today," said another.

"He never lacks appetite—he's always eating into us," joked Yakov, who seemed happy about something.

By this time Kolobov had reached the window and crawled through it. Presently he appeared before the crowd ragged, dirty and sweaty supported by two workmen. He was hardly able to drag one foot after the other. They put him in a cab and drove off. The crowd began to disperse, but a few people surrounded Mazin and asked him how he had ever hit on the idea of rescuing the boss. Mazin just stood there with the rope in his hands.

"I don't know," he said. "The board was the main thing. Time for me to go and have my dinner."

"But you might have got killed. What made you do it?"

"I didn't get killed. Looks like our fellows have gone off already."

"There he is. Mazin! We've been searching for you everywhere. Couldn't make out where you'd got to, and it turns out you're here!" bubbled Grandad Ossip who appeared at this moment. "Come along and have dinner. The Lord was with you this time, Mazin. That was the Lord's doings, because look at that board—a flimsy thing. But He wasn't willing, the Lord wasn't, to have a man die before he'd repented. You played your part, of course, and the rope too—but don't let it go to your head."

Mazin walked on beside the sage, snuffling and paying little attention to his effusions.

"You didn't get hurt, did you?"

"No. Just a little knock on the leg."

"Does it hurt?"

"Not much. It'll pass."

"Rub it with some vodka."

"I'd rather drink the vodka," said Mazin after a pause, "if I had it."

"You'll have it," promised Grandad Ossip joyously.

When the workmen had finished their meal and drunk their vodka, they sat waiting for the contractor to come and give orders regarding the scaffolding.

"He'll come soon, I guess," said Yakov glumly, gazing at the ceiling.

"He'll come for sure. He'll come to rag us—say we did it on purpose to get rid of him," declared young Afonia with a resigned chuckle.

"Why shouldn't he rag us?" asked Grandad Ossip. "It's his right, for we're partly to blame. To be sure the planks were old, but we've got eyes and hands, haven't we? And so he has a right to rag us."

They argued with the old man, but they could not deny that although the boards were old, the uprights pieced together, and the supply of nails insufficient, they themselves had been careless, and that being so, Kolobov had a right to be angry with them.

"What's the sense in all this talk?" said Yakov impatiently. "As if it mattered whether he had a right or not. He always barks, right or no right."

There was no denying this, but in the present instance the men were to be disappointed.

Zakhar Ivanovich appeared before the workmen looking very pompous and important, and before he had even set foot inside the door they could see he had no intention of making a row.

"Where's Vanka?" he asked.

There were three Vankas among the workmen. Two of them got up off the benches they were sitting on and looked inquiringly at the contractor.

"Where's the other one?" said Kolobov with a frown.

"The Vyatka one? He's lying on a bunk taking a snooze. Vanka! Hey, Vanka! The boss is calling you!"

Mazin grunted, yawned, got up and shuffled over to the contractor. Kolobov took such a deep breath that his belly shook and his cheeks billowed out.

"Well, Mazin," he began slowly, "I'm about to make a speech for your benefit. It turns out you're the smartest of all these chimpanzees, and maybe I would have met my death if it hadn't been for you, because what do we have here? Do you call them humans? Blocks of wood, that's what they are—solid wood without a grain of sense. Well, and so it turns out I'm beholden to you for saving my life, see? And I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart."

As Kolobov swept the room with a glance full of reproach, he read expectant curiosity on all the faces.

"What're your eyes popping out of your heads for? Are you thinking you'll help drink up the reward I'm going to give Vanka? The first fellow that takes a drink on him gets fined a ruble! Put that in your pipe and smoke it! And don't you go giving anything away, Vanka! They're smart, they are—licking their chops over your money already, the bastards. They see a fellow's not very bright and so they think they can drink the pants off him. Go and pay your taxes with this money, Vanka, or do anything

else you like with it, but don't let them have a smell of it."

"What money?" asked Mazin.

"Just a minute. Here. And many thanks to you."

The contractor thrust a three-ruble note into Mazin's hand and gazed at him in an attitude of magnanimous expectation. But Mazin just stood staring at the note in his hand.

"You mean this is for me?" he asked slowly.

"You funny fish! Of course it's for you!"

"H'm. In other words, this is for—for climbing up with that rope and—in a word—"

"Exactly, you blockhead!" laughed Kolobov, amused by Mazin's dullness and lack of spirit.

"Do you think I did that for a three-spot?" asked Vanka Mazin as he stood there with hanging head, still staring at the note in his hand and evading the contractor's eyes.

"Why, is it too little for you?" grunted Kolobov dryly, and he put his hand back into the pocket of his trousers. Mazin glanced up at him from under his brows, then slowly

lifted his head and took a deep breath. His mouth twitched and he made the face he always made when the meat in the soup was more than usually tainted or the cabbage too rotten.

"So you think I did it for a three-spot, do you? Here, take it back. You're a stupid man, Zakhar Ivanovich. Think of that—made me a present of a three-spot! I climbed up there to save your immortal soul, and not for no three-spot. To keep you from ending your life without repenting. And you hand me a bank-note! Watch out I don't smash your nose in for this reward of yours! Get out of the way! Get out! I can't bear the sight of you!"

He began this speech in his usual slow and ponderous manner, but he raised his voice to a snarl toward the end. The carpenters stared at him wide-eyed, Grandad Ossip smiled, Kolobov grew pale at the unexpected turn things had taken.

"What's that? You'll smash my nose in? You're telling me to get out? *Me*?" he gasped, choking with indignation. "And you, you old devil! What are you laughing at?"

"Get out, Zakhar Ivanovich! Watch out,

don't fool with me," warned Mazin. "Give me my pay, I'm leaving!"

"Good for you!" said Grandad Ossip in a loud voice.

The contractor was completely disarmed. The eyes of all the workmen were on him; they looked at him coldly and hostilely, and he sensed that the awe he inspired as their boss had vanished into thin air. Yet he could not leave. Something held him back. So he just stood there in front of them with a crooked smile on his face and kept repeating:

"Very clever of you, I must say. Humph. Well, come on, say something else."

"I would," said Ivan, "only I don't know how. But I know how to plant my fist in your mug! Get out of here! Take that blot off my eyes!"

"Good for you!" ejaculated Grandad Ossip.

"So that's how it is, you bastards? Very well. I'll show you! I'll give it to you!"

But he knew he was incapable of showing them or giving them anything, and so he turned and went out.

"Good for you, Ivan! You did right!" Grandad Ossip kept shouting as he pranced

about Mazin. "Good for you! And so simple! A bank-note? Oh, no, it's not always that the bank-note comes out on top! And he was so sure it would! Good for you, Ivan! You showed him, all right!"

And all the workmen realized that preposterous Vanka Mazin had showed the boss a thing or two and done it exceedingly well. And they stared at him as at some sort of a monstrosity—with curiosity tempered by fear. Perhaps he had kept a shot to be fired at them? But he had already relapsed into the foolish figure of Vanka Mazin as they knew him, as indifferent, as dull and spineless as ever.

That evening Mazin and Grandad Ossip, both of whom had been dismissed by the contractor, were sitting in a tavern and drinking tea. As Mazin silently munched his white bread, Grandad Ossip expatiated on the significance of what Vanka had done.

"That three-spot was a stab in the heart to you. You climbed up there at the risk of your life, and what for? Because you pitied him. After all, he's a human being like the rest of us, and we've all of us got souls. And

then he ups and hands you that three-spot. How could he do such a thing? What's it worth, that money? You put your heart and soul into what you did, and for him it meant nothing but a three-spot. That's an insult."

With difficulty Vanka Mazin swallowed the bread stuffed into both his cheeks and took up a glass of tea as he slowly delivered himself of the following words:

"Too bad I didn't let him have it easy-like. Maybe just pull him around by the hair a little. But I felt sorry for him. I could see he was just a fool; what can you expect of such as him?"

He dismissed him with a wave of the hand and noisily sucked the tea up out of his saucer, smacking his lips appetizingly at every swallow.

1897

MISCHIEF-MAKER

An irate editor ran nervously about the large light room that was the outer office of the local newspaper, clutching the latest issue in his hands, swearing and expostulating under his breath. He was a small man, and his sharp, thin face was adorned with a little beard and gold-rimmed spectacles. He stamped his little feet and kept running in circles beside the long table in the middle of the room piled high with crumpled newspapers, proofs, and manuscripts.

The publisher—tall, corpulent, fair-haired and middle-aged—was leaning on the table with one hand and rubbing his forehead with the other; his light eyes followed the editor, and a derisive smile played on his fat white

face. The maker-up, a sallow, angular individual with a hollow chest, dressed in a dirty brown frock-coat which was far too long for him, was standing timidly against the wall. He would raise his eyebrows and fasten his eyes on the ceiling, as though thinking or remembering something, and a minute later he would sniff disappointedly and drop his head in dejection. People with worried and discontented looks on their faces came in and went out again, brushing past the messenger-boy standing in the door-way.

From time to time the editor's irascible voice rose to a treble, and every time it did, the publisher's face puckered and the maker-up winced.

"I'll prosecute the scoundrel in court. Has the proof-reader come? Damn it all, I'm asking you—has he come? Tell all the typesetters to come, too. Have you told them? Good Lord, think what will happen! All the newspapers will pick this up. A disgrace! It will be shouted all over the country. The scoundrel shall be made to pay for this!"

He raised his hands with the newspaper in them, then stopped abruptly, as though he

wished to wrap his head in the sheet to protect it from impending disgrace.

"First find him," advised the publisher with a wry smile.

"Don't worry, I will!" the editor said with flashing eyes and started off again at a trot, pressing the newspaper to his breast and plucking at it fiercely. "I'll find him, and give it to him! What's the matter with that proof-reader? Ah, come in, gentlemen, come in. You humble captains of leaden hosts; come in, come in."

The type-setters filed into the room. They knew what was up, and each expected to be accused of being the guilty party. Their faces, smudged and powdered with lead-dust, wore wooden expressions of imperturbability. The editor stopped in front of them and clasped his hands behind his back. He was shorter than they and had to raise his eyes to look into their faces. He threw his head back so quickly that his spectacles suddenly jumped up on to his forehead; thinking they would fall, he raised a hand to catch them, but they dropped safely back on to the bridge of his nose.

"Devil take you!" he muttered, grinding his teeth.

Smiles appeared on the smudged faces of the type-setters. Someone gave a suppressed laugh.

"I haven't invited you here to display your teeth!" said the editor going white. "I think you've discredited the paper enough. If there's an honest man among you, if there's one who knows what a newspaper is and what the press is, he'll say who did this. Here. In the leading article." The editor feverishly unfolded the newspaper.

"What happened?" came a voice which expressed nothing but simple curiosity.

"Ah! So you don't know? Well, here it is! Look—'Our factory legislation has always been a subject of heated discussion in the press, that is, a subject on which reams of stupid stuff-and-nonsense have been scribbled.' Well? Are you satisfied? Will the one who added this 'scribbling' kindly step up? 'Scribbled' mind you! How witty! Well, who's responsible for this 'stupid stuff-and-nonsense'?"

"Whose article is it? Yours? Well, then you're responsible for what's in it," said the same calm voice again.

This was insolence, and everybody supposed that the culprit had been found. There

was movement in the room; the publisher edged closer to the group, the editor got up on his toes to see the speaker's face. The type-setters drew apart. A stocky fellow in a blue blouse stood before the editor. He had a pock-marked face and tufts of hair curled upwards over his left temple. His hands were thrust deep into his trouser-pockets, his grey eyes were fixed indifferently on the editor and a faint smile could be glimpsed through the blond whiskers that curled about his lips. Everyone was looking at him—the publisher with a severe frown, the editor in anger and amazement, the maker-up with a restrained smile. The faces of the type-setters portrayed fear, curiosity, and ill-concealed pleasure.

"So it's you, is it?" the editor asked at last, pointing his finger at the pock-marked type-setter and pressing his lips together menacingly.

"It's me," the pock-marked man replied with a particularly vexing grin.

"Ah! Enchanted. And may I ask you why you did it?"

"I didn't say I did it," said the type-setter with a glance at his comrades.

"It must have been him, Mitry Pavlovich," the maker-up volunteered.

"Well, if it must have been, I suppose it was," the type-setter agreed good-naturedly, dismissing the matter with a wave of his hand.

Everybody fell silent again. No one had expected so simple a confession. The editor's anger was entirely supplanted by amazement. The space round the pock-marked man widened, the maker-up quickly drew back to the table and the type-setters edged away.

"Did you do it deliberately, with premeditation?" the publisher asked, looking wide-eyed at the culprit.

"Be kind enough to answer!" shouted the editor, waving his crumpled newspaper.

"Don't shout. I'm not to be scared so easily. Shouting won't get you anywhere with me." An impudent devil-may-care glitter flashed in the eyes of the type-setter. "You're right," he continued, shifting from one foot to the other and turning to the publisher, "I stuck in the words deliberately."

"D'you hear?" the editor said to the gathering.

"Whatever made you do it, you idiot?" the publisher exclaimed in sudden fury. "Do you realize the harm you've done me?"

"No harm at all. The retail sales will probably rise. As for the editor—well, I s'pose this isn't exactly to his liking."

The editor was speechless with indignation; he stood staring with flashing eyes at this calm and vengeful workman and could find no words to express his feelings.

"It'll go hard with you for this," the publisher threatened, but suddenly he softened and slapped his knee.

As a matter of fact, he was pleased with the incident and with the worker's impudent replies: the editor had always treated him haughtily, never hiding his sense of intellectual superiority, and here he was now, this proud and self-assured man, trampled in the dust, and—by whom?

"We'll get even with you for that insolence of yours," he added.

"I didn't expect you to let me off easy," the type-setter said.

The tone and the words produced another sensation. The type-setters exchanged glances,

the maker-up shrank and raised his eye-brows, the editor stepped back to the table and leaned on it. More flustered and humiliated than irate, he stared intently at his opponent.

"What's your name?" the publisher asked, taking a note-book out of his pocket.

"Nikolka Gvozdev," the maker-up announced hurriedly.

"Keep your mouth shut, Judas; nobody asked you anything," said the type-setter, throwing the maker-up a nasty look. "I have a tongue of my own; I'll speak for myself. My name is Nikolai Semyonovich Gvozdev. The address—"

"We'll find you somehow," the publisher cut him short. "And now get the hell out of here. All of you."

Stamping noisily, the type-setters took themselves off. Gvozdev was about to follow them.

"Hold on—just a minute," the editor said softly but distinctly, holding out his hand to Gvozdev.

Gvozdev turned, shrugged his shoulders, fingered his little beard, stared challengingly at the editor.

"I want to ask you something," began the editor. He tried to be calm, but could not manage it: his voice kept rising to a scream. "You confessed—that in causing this scandal—you meant to do me harm, didn't you? What is it, revenge? I want to know why. Do you understand? Can you tell me?"

Gvozdev shrugged his shoulders, pulled down the corners of his mouth, and dropped his eyes. The publisher tapped his foot impatiently, the maker-up stretched his neck, the editor bit his lip and twisted his fingers nervously. They all waited.

"I suppose I may as well tell you," Gvozdev began after a minute's silence, "but since I'm an uneducated man, it may not be very clear. Well, if it isn't, you'll just have to excuse me. Here's the whole thing. You write all sorts of articles, keep advising everybody to love his fellows and so on. I'm no good at telling you this in detail, I don't know enough. You know for yourself what you preach every day. Well, I read those articles of yours. You write about us, the workers, and I read what you write. But it's disgusting, because it's all rubbish. Just a lot

of shameless words, Mitry Pavlovich. 'Don't rob,' you say, and what goes on in your print-shop? Last week Kiryakov worked three and a half days, earned three rubles and eighty kopeks and then fell ill. His wife comes to the office for the money, and the manager tells her she won't get it, that *she's* the one must pay—pay a ruble twenty in fines. That's what you call 'don't rob'! Why don't you write about *that*? Or about how the manager keeps growling at us and beats the printer's boys for every little thing? You don't write about such things because you don't want to show yourself up. You write that people have a hard time living in this world. But the only reason you write all this stuff is because you don't know how to do anything else. That's all. . . . And that's why you make fine speeches about the Turkish atrocities and don't see the atrocities being committed under your own nose. Aren't they rubbish, those articles of yours? For a long time I've been wanting to put a few true words into your articles just to shame you. Don't think you got all you deserve this time."

Gvozdev blew his chest out proudly, raised

his head high, and stared straight at the editor. The editor gripped the table, threw back his head, turned red, then white, smiled contemptuously, embarrassedly, painfully. His eyes blinked rapidly.

"Is he a socialist?" the publisher asked the editor in a low voice in which fear mingled with curiosity. The latter only cocked his head and smiled.

The maker-up withdrew to the window behind a tub of philodendron, which threw a shadow design upon the floor. From behind the tub he squinted at everyone with his little mouse-like eyes. There was a kind of impatient expectation in them, and a joyous glitter.

The publisher stared at the editor, who, conscious of the stare, raised his head. There was an uneasy light in his eyes and his face was twitching as he called after Gvozdev, now making his way to the door.

"Just a minute—hold on! You've insulted me. But you aren't right. I hope you know it. I'm grateful for the straightforwardness with which you spoke your mind, but I repeat. . . ."

He wanted to speak ironically, but instead of irony there was something sickly and feigned in his words, and he paused, trying to rally for an attack that would be worthy of him and of his accuser, to whom in his wildest dreams he could not have conceded the right to judge him, the editor.

"It's only natural." Gvozdev shook his head. "People who talk a lot seem to be always right." From where he stood, he glanced about with an expression which clearly spoke of his impatience to leave.

"Just a minute," the editor said, raising his voice and his arm. "You brought an accusation against me, and prior to that you punished me arbitrarily for my alleged guilt. I have a right to defend myself, and I ask you to listen."

"Don't worry about me. Defend yourself before the publisher if it's necessary. What's the use of talking to me? I've done you harm, so haul me off to the police. But why try to defend yourself?" He turned abruptly, and went off with his hands folded behind his back.

He had heavy boots with large heels, and stamped loudly as he walked; his footsteps

resounded hollowly in the large, barn-like office.

"Well, there's a bag of tricks for you!" exclaimed the publisher when the door slammed behind Gvozdev.

"Vasily Ivanovich, I had nothing to do with this business," pleaded the maker-up, spreading his hands supplicatingly and approaching the publisher with little cautious steps. "I make up the type set and have no way of knowing what the one on duty slips me. I'm on my feet here all night, and my wife is ill at home, and the children aren't looked after—three of them. For thirty rubles a month I give my life's blood, so to speak. As for Fyodor Pavlovich, when he was taking on Gvozdev, I warned him: Fyodor Pavlovich, I said, I've known Nikolka since he was a boy, and I must tell you he's a mischief-maker and a thief, there's no good in him. He's been up before the justice of the peace, I said—even served a term in prison."

"What was he in prison for?" the publisher asked without looking up.

"For pigeons—that is, for breaking locks. One night he broke the locks of seven pigeon-

houses—set the whole chase free! I myself lost a couple of grays, a tumbler with a whistle, and a pouter. Very valuable birds."

"Did he steal them?" the publisher inquired with curiosity.

"No, he doesn't do that. He was tried for theft once, but acquitted. Just a mischief-maker. He let the birds loose for fun; mocked us, pigeon-fanciers. He's been beaten for it more than once. He was taken to hospital after one beating, but as soon as he got well he planted goblins in the stove of my son's godmother.

"Goblins?" the publisher asked in surprise.

"What nonsense!" The editor shrugged, knit his brow, bit his lips and sank into thought.

"It's the truth, only I didn't say it right," the maker-up explained awkwardly. "You see, he's a stove-setter, this Nikolka, a jack-of-all-trades. He's tried lithography and engraving and been a plumber, too. Well, about this godmother—she has connections with the clergy and a house of her own. She hired him to reset her stove. He reset it very well, but in the wall he planted a bottle of quick-

silver with needles and things in it. This makes a sound when the stove is lighted—a queer sound, like a groan or a sigh, and people say there are goblins in the house. The heat makes the quicksilver in the bottle expand and the needles scratch the glass, as though someone was grinding his teeth. The needles make one sound, the tacks another, and you get a kind of hellish concert. My boy's godmother even intended selling the house, but no one wanted it—who would have it with the goblins? She held three prayer-services with holy water. Nothing helped. The woman was in a terrible fix: here she was with a daughter to marry off, a hundred head of poultry, two cows, a fine house, and—goblins! Worried herself sick, she did. It was sad to see her. And the same Nikolka saved her, one might say. Give me fifty rubles, says he, and I'll put an end to the goblins. She gave him twenty-five to begin with, but when she found out about the bottle she refused to give him the rest and made an awful fuss. Wanted to take him to court, but was advised against it. And he has lots of other tricks to his credit."

"I'll feel the effects of one of these tricks tomorrow," the editor exclaimed excitedly and began to dash about the room again. "Oh, my God! How low of him!"

"There, there," the publisher said soothingly, "print a correction, explain how it all happened. . . . A queer fellow, damn it all! Put goblins in a stove! Humph! We'll teach him a lesson, of course, but the scoundrel is clever, and one gets to feel a sort of—something—for him." The publisher snapped his fingers and looked up at the ceiling.

"So you find it amusing, do you?" cried the editor.

"Well, and what of it? Isn't the whole thing funny? He's clever, damn him!" retorted the publisher. "What charges do you intend to bring against him?"

The editor ran over to the publisher.

"None. I can't, Vasily Ivanovich, because that inventor of goblins is right. The devil only knows what goes on in your print-shop, d'you hear? And I'm made a fool of all because of you. He's right a thousand times."

"And that insertion—is that right, too?" the publisher asked bitingly, pursing his lips.

"Yes, that, too. After all, we're a liberal newspaper."

"And we have a circulation of two thousand, including complimentary and exchange copies," the publisher stated dryly, "while our competitor sells around nine thousand."

"Well?!"

"That's all."

The editor waved his hand hopelessly, and again began pacing the floor.

"A fine fix," he murmured, shrugging his shoulders. "Everything goes against me. All the dogs pile on one, and he can't bite back. This damned worker's the last straw. Oh, my God!"

"Stop fretting, old fellow," Vasily Ivanovich advised suddenly with a good-natured grin, as though he were exhausted by the noise and excitement. "Things like this happen from time to time, but they blow over. You'll redeem your reputation. The whole business is more comic than tragic."

He held his plump hand out amicably to the editor and was about to go into the inner office when the door opened suddenly and Gvozdev appeared. He was in a cap and smiled politely.

"I came to tell you, mister editor, that if you intend to take me to court, say so now. I mean to go away, and I don't want to be brought back."

"Get out!" howled the editor almost sobbing with rage and rushing to the other end of the room.

"Then it's quits." And Gvozdev straightened his cap, turned serenely, and vanished.

"What a rogue!" the publisher breathed in admiration, as he turned with a grin on his face and began unhurriedly to put on his top-coat.

Two or three days later Gvozdev was walking sedately on the "Hill." He was wearing a blue blouse with a belt round it, loose trousers and brightly polished boots. A white cap was set at an angle on the back of his head and he carried a knotty stick in his hand.

The "Hill" was an easy slope down to the river. There had once been a thick grove on the slope, but now most of it was cleared. Here and there powerful gnarled oaks and elms, battered by thunder-storms, lifted twisted boughs into the sky. Tender shoots curled at their roots, vines clung to their

trunks. The feet of endless promenaders had made tortuous paths that led down to the sunlit river. Horizontally crossing the "Hill" was a wide walk—an abandoned post-road—and it was chiefly along this that the people strolled in two files moving in opposite directions.

Gvozdev loved to join the people walking up and down here, to feel that he was one of them –that he could breathe just as freely as they did of this air saturated with the smell of the leaves, that he could stroll just as leisurely as they, that he was a part of something big, and that he was the equal of all these others.

This day he was slightly drunk, his resolute pitted face looked good-natured and sociable. Fair locks of hair curled upwards over his left temple, handsomely setting off his ear and covering his cap-band, imparting to him the look of a swaggering workingman who is pleased with himself, is ready this very moment to sing, dance, or fight, and not averse to tossing down a drink or two. Nature seemed to have given him these locks with their peculiar curl as a recommendation to the world at large: here he is, Nikolai Gvozdev, a man of spirit who knows his own price.

He looked about him approvingly, jostled the walkers amicably, suffered their pushes without complaint, apologized politely when he stepped on ladies' trains, swallowed dust as everyone else did, and on the whole felt on top of the world.

The sun, seen through the foliage, was setting in the meadows across the river. The sky was purple, warm, beckoning one to where its edge touched the deep green of the pastures. Fanciful shadows spread at the feet of the promenaders, but the people stepped on them without heeding their beauty.

Gvozdev had a cigarette hanging from the left corner of his mouth. He let wisps of smoke out of the other as he sized up the people, conscious of an urgent desire to chat with someone over a mug of beer in the restaurant at the bottom of the "Hill." There were no acquaintances in sight, and there was no suitable occasion to make new ones. In spite of the holiday and the bright spring weather, the public was sullen for some reason, and while he had peered several times into the faces of passers-by with a good-natured smile and an expression of readiness to strike up

a conversation, no one responded to his overtures. In the mass of heads his eyes suddenly singled out the familiar head of the editor, as flat and smooth as if it had been planed. Gvozdev smiled as he remembered how he had told the man off. Occasionally the editor's flat grey hat vanished behind other hats, and this worried Gvozdev; he raised himself on his toes, found it, and smiled again.

He walked along with one eye on the editor, recalling the time when he, Gvozdev, had been Nikolka, the fitter's son, and the editor had been Mitka, son of the deacon. They had another play-fellow, Mishka, whom they had nicknamed Sugarbowl. Then there was Vaska Zhukov, son of a government employee who lived in the last house in the street. It was a good house—old, overgrown with moss, and with a lot of out-houses about it. Vaska's father kept a marvellous chase of pigeons. Their yard, with all the rubbish Vaska's close-fisted father kept there—broken-down carriages, barrels, chests—was an ideal place to play hide-and-seek in. Now Vaska was district physician, and railway warehouses had been built on the site of the old house.

It had stood in Zadny Mokry Street on the outskirts of the town; the boys in that street had lived together in peace, but had been at constant war with the youngsters of other streets. They laid waste orchards and vegetable patches, played knucklebones and ball and other games, and attended the parish school. That had been some twenty years before.

Now everything was different. Nikolka's companions, who had been just as mischievous and dirty as he himself, had moved away and grown up to be important people. But Nikolka, the fitter's son, had never got out of Zadny Mokry Street. On leaving the parish school they had gone to the gymnasium. He had not. What if he should go up to the editor now and speak to him? Just say hello and start talking? He'd begin by apologizing for what he'd done and then they'd chat about—about anything—about life in general, perhaps.

The editor's hat kept bobbing up, as though luring him on, and Gvozdev made his decision. The editor was walking all by himself in a space free of promenaders. He was strolling along on his thin legs clad in light trousers,

his head turning from side to side, his short-sighted eyes squinting at the public. Gvozdev drew level and looked him in the face affably, waiting for a fitting moment to greet him and wondering how he would respond.

"Good day, Mitry Pavlovich!"

The editor turned, lifted his hat with one hand, adjusted his spectacles with the other, recognized Gvozdev, and frowned.

This did not dishearten Nikolai Gvozdev. On the contrary, he leaned pleasantly towards the editor and engulfed him in fumes of vodka as he said:

"Taking a walk?"

The editor stopped for a second, his lips and nostrils quivering fastidiously.

"What do you want?" he asked dryly.

"Nothing. It's just such a nice day today. And I wanted to talk to you about that incident."

"I don't wish to talk to you," the editor declared, quickening his steps.

Gvozdev followed him.

"Don't wish to? I can understand that. I embarrassed you, and you hold a grudge against me, of course."

"You are—you are drunk," the editor

snapped, "and if you don't leave me alone, I shall call the police."

Gvozdev laughed softly.

"What for?"

The editor glared at him with the despondent look of a man who finds himself in an annoying situation and does not know how to get out of it. People were throwing them curious glances. The editor looked about helplessly.

Gvozdev noticed this.

"Let's turn off," he said, and without waiting for a reply he pressed the editor off the wide road on to a narrow path leading down through the shrubbery to the foot of the hill.

The editor did not resist—perhaps he had no time to, or perhaps he thought he could rid himself more quickly and simply of his interlocutor if he were left alone with him. Slowly and cautiously he made his way down the hill, leaning heavily on his stick, conscious of Gvozdev's breath on the back of his neck.

"There's a fallen tree here somewhere; we'll sit on it. Don't be cross with me for what I've done, Mitry Pavlovich. I apologize. I was angry. Our anger is so strong sometimes that

even wine can't quench it. At times like that one's apt to do mischief: give a passer-by a poke in the side or something else. I'm not sorry—what's done is done, but maybe I overdid it, went a bit too far."

Perhaps this frank confession touched the editor; perhaps Gvozdev's person aroused his curiosity, or perhaps he simply realized he could not easily rid himself of the man. At any rate, he said:

"What did you want to speak to me about?"

"Oh, lot's of things. There's a rankling bitterness in my soul. Let's sit down."

"I haven't time."

"I know, the newspaper. It'll rob you of half your life and ruin your health. Don't think I don't understand. The publisher? He's invested money in the newspaper, but you've invested your life's blood. You've ruined your eyes already. Here, sit down."

Beside the path lay a large tree trunk—the decaying remains of what had once been a powerful oak. The branches of a walnut-tree bent over it, forming a green canopy; the sky glanced through the twigs, coloured by the sunset, and the spicy smell of fresh foliage

filled the air. Gvozdev sat down, turned to the editor who was still standing and looking about indecisively, and began to speak:

"I had a few drops to drink today. It's a dull life, Mitry Pavlovich! I've lost touch with my fellow-workers; somehow they and I see things differently. When I caught sight of you today, I suddenly remembered you and I had been good friends once."

The swift changes in the editor's expression were so funny that Gvozdev could not help laughing.

"Good friends? When?"

"Oh, a long time ago, Mitry Pavlovich. We used to live on Zadny Mokry Street then, remember? One house away from each other. And Mishka Sugarbowl—now he's Mikhail Yefimovich Khrulev, Court Investigator—he lived across the street with his strict father. D'you remember Yefimovich? Many was the time he pulled us round by the hair. Come, sit down."

The editor nodded and sat down next to Gvozdev. He was rubbing his forehead and looking at him with the strained look of a man trying to remember something long forgotten.

Gvozdev was carried away by reminiscences.

"That was the life! Why can't a man stay a child all his life? Grows up—what for? Then grows down—into the grave. Has all sorts of troubles—gets bitter and like a beast. How idiotic it all is—a man lives on and on, and in the end there's nothing left that matters much. But in those days we didn't have such dark thoughts. We lived as carefree as the birds. Fluttered over fences after the fruits of other people's labour. D'you remember, I popped you on the nose with a cucumber once while we were thieving in Petrovna's vegetable patch. You raised a cry, and I ran away. You and your mother came and complained, and father whipped the hide off me. And Mishka—Mikhail Yefimovich—"

The editor smiled in spite of himself. He had wanted to preserve a serious mien in the presence of this man, but there was something touching in these memories of bright sunny childhood days, and for the time being he detected nothing in Gvozdev's tone that threatened his self-respect. Besides, their surroundings were very pleasant. Somewhere up above feet were shuffling over the sand of the foot-

path, faint voices reached them, sometimes laughter; the wind gave little sighs, and all these little sounds were drowned in the melancholy rustle of the leaves. When the rustle subsided, there were moments of absolute silence, as though everything were listening intently to Gvozdev's disordered reminiscences of their boyhood.

"Remember Varka, house-painter Kolokoltsov's daughter? She's married to Shaposhnikov, the printer. What a lady! I'm afraid to go near her. In those days she was a sickly little girl. Remember how she got lost once, and all the youngsters from our street looked for her in the fields and ravines? Found her in the military camp, and brought her home across the fields. What a fuss there was—a regular hullabaloo! Kolokolstov treated us to honey-cakes, and Varka said to her mother: 'I've been at the officer lady's, and she wants me to be her daughter.' Ha-ha! Daughter! Nice little girl she was."

From the river came sounds like the sighs of someone who was grieving. A ship was passing, noisily churning up the water with its paddle-wheels. The sky was rosy-

hued and the dusk thickened about Gvozdev and the editor. As the spring night advanced slowly, the quiet became complete, and, as if adjusting himself to it, Gvozdev lowered his voice. The editor listened without interrupting as he called up pictures of long ago. All these things had really happened.

"It turns out we were really feathered in the same nest, Mitry Pavlovich, but our flight was different. It makes me feel bad to think that my old play-fellows and I are so different just because I didn't have a chance to go on studying. Does that really make a man? They say it's his soul that counts and the place he holds in the hearts of his fellow-men. But—you're my fellow-man. And what am I to you? Nothing at all, isn't that true?"

The editor, engrossed in his own thoughts, apparently had not caught the question.

"Yes, it is," he replied gravely and abstractedly, but on hearing Gvozdev laugh he caught himself and said, "Pardon? What did you say was true?"

"It's true that I'm just nothing at all to you. It's all the same to you whether I exist or not. You don't give a hang for my soul.

I live alone in the world, and all the people who know me are sick to death of me. Because I have a nasty streak in me and I like to play all sorts of tricks. But I, too, have feelings and a brain. I resent my condition. Why am I any worse than you? It's only my job—"

"Yes, all this is very sad," the editor said, wrinkling his forehead. After a pause he continued in a soothing voice, "But you see, we have to look at it from another point of view—"

"Mitry Pavlovich! What's a point of view? People mustn't consider each other from a point of view. It must be straight from the heart. What's a point of view? I speak about the unfairness of life. D'you think it's possible to reject me from any point of view? But life has rejected me. I haven't elbow-space in it. Why? Because I'm uneducated? But if you, the educated ones, wouldn't keep looking at things from points of view, then you ought to think about me and to lift me up to your level, instead of letting me rot here in ignorance and bitterness. Or maybe you oughtn't—from some point of view?"

Gvozdev looked at his companion in tri-

umph. He felt he was in good form, and was pouring out all the philosophy he had thought up during long years of hard work and disordered living. The editor was confounded by the onslaught of his companion; he tried to determine what sort of person he had before him, and how he ought to reply to him. Meanwhile Gvozdev, very pleased with himself, continued:

"You are clever, you'll give me a hundred answers, and all of them will be—no, you oughtn't. But I say that you ought. Why? Because you and I, we're both people from the same street and the same class. You don't belong to the gentry, the ruling class. It's all clear as daylight when we deal with them. They say: 'go to hell!'—and we go. Because they were born aristocrats. You've become an aristocrat because you learned grammar and such-like, but you're our kind, I can demand that you show me my place in life. I'm city-bred, and Khrulev is, too, and you're just the deacon's son."

"But wait," put in the editor. "I don't deny your rights—"

Gvozdev, however, was not at all interested in what the editor denied or admitted; he had

to speak his mind, and he felt at this moment that he could say everything that had ever troubled him.

"No, *you* wait," he said in a low mysterious voice, his eyes sparkling with excitement as he drew closer to the editor. "Do you think it's easy for me to work for my former play-fellows whose noses I used to smash? Was it easy for me to take a forty-kopek tip from *Gospodin* Khrulev, the Court Investigator, when I put a new toilet in his house last year? We're the same kind, and his name used to be Mishka Sugarbowl. His teeth are just as bad today as they were when he was little."

The editor was looking at him sideways pensively, silently turning over in his mind what to say to him. Something good, truthful, sincere. But at the moment he found nothing suitable in his head or his heart. It had been a long time since idealistic expatiating on various "problems" had roused in him anything but a feeling of weariness and boredom. He had wanted a rest today, had intentionally avoided acquaintances—and here was this man with his speeches. There was a bit of truth in them, of course, as there was in

everything people said. They were curious speeches, and would serve as an interesting subject for a feuilleton. . . .

"You haven't said anything new, you know," he began. "The injustice of human relations has long been a matter of discussion. But it is novel to hear these things said by a man of your type. You express your thoughts somewhat faultily and one-sidedly, but—"

"That point of view of yours again!" grinned Gvozdev. "Oh, gentlemen, gentlemen! You were given brains, but not hearts. Tell me something to lift this load off my own heart!"

He dropped his head and waited for an answer.

The editor looked at him and frowned; he wanted badly to get away. Gvozdev's intoxication was making itself felt. He looked at the white cap which had slid to the back of the man's head, at his pitted cheeks and his rakish locks; he measured his powerful frame with his eye, and decided that here was a typical worker, and that if—

"Well?" asked Gvozdev.

"What can I say to you? Frankly speaking, I don't quite see what you're after."

"That's it. You can't tell me anything," said Gvozdev with a little laugh.

The editor sighed with relief, presuming that the conversation had come to an end and Gvozdev would not pester him any more. Suddenly he had a dreadful thought: What if he should strike him? The man was so incensed!

He recalled the expression on Gvozdev's face during the scene at the editorial office, and threw him a sidelong glance.

It had grown dark. The silence was broken by a song floating up from the river—a chorus of voices, the tenors distinctly audible. Beetles buzzed in the air with a metallic sound. Stars pecked through the foliage. Occasionally a branch overhead would quiver, causing the leaves to flutter gently.

"It's getting damp," said the editor cautiously.

Gvozdev started and turned to him.

"What did you say?"

"I said it's getting damp, and that's bad for the health."

"Oh!"

There was a pause. A shout came from the river:

"Hey-y! There on the barge!"

"I'm afraid I must go. Good-bye."

"Let's have a couple of beers together," Gvozdev said impetuously, adding with a grin, "Do me the honour!"

"Sorry, but it's too late. I must be getting back."

Gvozdev got up and looked sullenly at the editor, who got up, too, and held out his hand.

"So you don't want to drink beer with me, eh? Well, to hell with you!" cried Gvozdev pulling his cap over his eyes. "What an aristocrat! Five kopeks a dozen! All right, I'll drink by myself."

The editor bravely turned his back on his companion and went up the footpath, pulling his head into his shoulders in an odd way, as though he feared striking it against something. Gvozdev went down the hill with big strides.

From the river came a strained voice:

"You on the barge there! Hey, you bastards! Send the b-o-a-t!"

And a soft echo spread among the trees: "The b-o-a-t!"

1897

THE ORLOVS

ALMOST every Saturday evening before vespers, in a crowded little courtyard cluttered with rubbish and hedged in by wooden outhouses sagging with age, could be heard a woman's frantic cries coming from two basement windows in a filthy old house belonging to merchant Petunnikov.

"Stop! Stop, you drunken devil!" the woman would shout in a contralto voice.

"Let me out!" would come the reply in a man's tenor.

"I won't, you beast!"

"You won't, won't you? We'll see!"

"Not if you kill me!"

"You won't, won't you, you heathen!"

"God, he's killing me! God!"

"I say you will!"

At the first cry Senka Chizhik, house-painter Suchkov's apprentice who spent all his days mixing paints in one of the sheds in the courtyard, would dash out with shining eyes, black as a mouse's, and shout at the top of his voice:

"The Orlovs are having a fight! Whoop-ee!"

Always ready for a thrill, Senka would rush over to the Orlovs' windows and throw himself face down on the ground, his tousled head hanging over the edge of the area, his eyes popping out of a rouguish face streaked with red and yellow paint as he stared into the dark hole which exuded a smell of mould, cobbler's wax, and fusty leather.

At the bottom of this hole two people were struggling, grunting and cursing with the effort.

"You'll kill me," gasped the woman.

"Never fear," her husband consoled her with concentrated venom.

Heavy, dull blows against something soft could be heard, then squeals, groans, and the strained breathing of someone lifting a great weight.

"Ooh, what a smack he gave her with that last!" said Senka, demonstrating what was

going on in the cellar to the little group that gathered round him and which usually consisted of a couple of tailors, the court-house courier named Levchenko, an accordionist named Kislyakov, and a few other lovers of free entertainment. They would ply him with questions and tug impatiently at his legs and his paint-soaked trousers.

"Well?"

"Now he's straddling her back and banging her nose against the floor," reported Senka, shivering ecstatically from the sensations he was experiencing.

The others, too, would bend down to the window, burning to see all the gruesome details with their own eyes. And although they had long been familiar with the tactics Grigory Orlov employed in warring with his wife, they could not help marvelling.

"Ooh, the fiend, has he broken it?"

"It's all bloody; spurting like a fountain."

"Merciful heavens!" the women would exclaim. "The heartless brute!"

The observations of the men were more objective.

"He's sure to kill her," they said.

"He'll stick a knife into her, mark my word," announced the accordionist prophetically. "He'll get sick of her tunes one of these days and put an end to them."

"All over!" whispered Senka as he jumped up and dashed to a new observation post in a far corner, knowing that Orlov would come out any moment now.

The people quickly dispersed to escape the eye of the raging cobbler. It was dangerous to encounter him, and besides, they had lost all interest, now that the fight was over.

Ordinarily there would not be a soul in the courtyard but Senka when Orlov put in an appearance. Breathing hard, his shirt torn, his hair on end, his agitated face scratched and sweaty, he would sweep the yard with bloodshot eyes, lock his hands behind his back, and saunter over to an old sledge lying upside down beside one of the outhouses. Sometimes he would whistle defiantly and glance from side to side as if about to challenge all the occupants of Petunnikov's house to a fight. Then he would sit down on the sledge runners, wipe the sweat and blood off his face on his shirt sleeve and relax into

a weary attitude, staring dully at the dirty wall of the house, at the gashes where the plaster had crumbled off and at the streaks of multi-coloured paint—Suchkov's house-painters were in the habit of wiping their brushes on this corner of the house when they came home from work.

Orlov was in his late twenties. The fine features of his sensitive face were ornamented by a little dark moustache which cast a deep shadow over his full red lips. Thick eyebrows nearly met above his large cartilaginous nose. From under these eyebrows peered black eyes that were always burning with unrest. A muscular, energetic man of middle size, somewhat stooped from his work, he would sit on the sledge for a long time in a sort of daze, staring at the streaked wall and drawing the air deep down into his broad brown chest.

The sun went down, but the air in the courtyard remained as oppressive as ever. It smelt of paint, of tar and sour cabbage and putrefaction. From all the windows on both floors of the house came sounds of singing and quarrelling. Now and again a sodden face

would be thrust through a window, stare at Orlov a moment, and vanish with a little laugh.

When the house-painters came home from work, they would shoot sidelong glances at Orlov in passing, wink at each other and fill the yard with their lively Kostroma dialect as they made ready to go, some to the bath-house, others to the pub. The tailors—a lean, bow-legged, half-clad lot—would crawl down into the yard from their quarters on the second floor and begin teasing the painters for pronouncing their words as if they were spitting out dried peas. And there would be noise and banter and gay bursts of laughter. But Orlov would sit there in silence without looking at anyone. And no one approached him or dared to make jokes at his expense, for they all knew he was ferocious at such moments.

There he would sit, consumed by a dull fury that bore down upon his chest and constrained his breath. His nostrils quivered and his lips were curled back to reveal two rows of big strong yellow teeth. Something dark and formless was welling up inside of him;

red spots swam before his eyes; black misery and a longing for vodka sucked at his vitals. He knew that a drink would bring relief, but it was not dark yet, and in such a ragged and disreputable state he was ashamed to walk down streets where he, Grigory Orlov, was known to everybody.

He did not wish to become a target for general laughter, but he could not make himself go home to wash and change his clothes. The wife he had beaten was lying there on the floor, and she was in every way repulsive to him just then.

She was lying there moaning, knowing that she was in the right; that she was his innocent victim. He, too, knew it. He knew that she was in the right and he in the wrong, but this only made him hate her the more, because deep down in his soul seethed a dark fury that was stronger than his knowledge of right and wrong. All his feelings were hazy and oppressive, and he could not help succumbing to the oppressiveness of them without being able to comprehend them, but knowing that a pint of vodka was the only thing that could bring him relief.

Here came Kislyakov, the accordionist. He was wearing a red silk shirt and a velveteen vest and his wide trousers were tucked into the tops of natty boots. He carried his accordion in a green cloth bag under one arm, his black moustache was twisted into a line as straight as an arrow, his cap was tipped jauntily over one ear, and his face radiated geniality. Orlov loved him for his gaiety, his playing, and his sanguine disposition, and he envied him his carefree existence.

Congratulations on winning the fight,
Grigory,
And winning a black eye as well.

Orlov was not angered by this raillery; he had heard him say the same thing at least fifty times before and knew the accordionist meant no harm by it; he was just having his little joke.

"Fought another Plevna?" asked Kislyakov, lingering for a moment in front of the cobbler. "Feeling posh—with a head like a squash? Come on, let's go the way of all flesh—let's have a little drink, you and me."

"In a little while," said Orlov without looking up.

"I'll wait for you there—and suffer in silence."

Orlov would not be long in following him. And when he was gone, a small plump woman would climb out of the basement, holding on to the walls for support. Her head was tightly bound up in a shawl, out of the folds of which peeped one eye and a bit of cheek and forehead. She tottered across the courtyard and sat down on the sledge where her husband had been sitting. No one was surprised to see Matrona—they were used to her appearing when her husband was gone and they knew she would sit there until Grigory, drunk and repentant, came home from the pub. She sat in the courtyard because it was stuffy in the cellar, and because she would have to help her drunken husband down the stairs. The stairs were steep and dilapidated; once Grigory had fallen down them and sprained his wrist. He had been unable to work for two weeks and she had had to pawn their few possessions to buy food.

Ever since then Matrona had waited up for him.

One of her neighbours would sometimes join

her there. Usually it would be the retired non-commissioned officer Levchenko, a staid and sensible Ukrainian with a drooping moustache, shaved head, and purple nose.

"Been fighting again?" he would ask with a yawn as he sat down beside her.

"What's it to you?" Matrona would snap back.

"Nothing whatever," the Ukrainian would reply, and there would be a long pause.

Something deep down in the woman's chest made a rasping sound when she breathed.

"What are you two always fighting about? What is it stands between you?" Levchenko would begin after sober reflection.

"That's our business."

"Don't doubt it," Levchenko would agree, nodding.

"Then what are you butting in for?"

"What a woman! There's no saying a word to her! You and Grigory are a match, I will say that. What you need is a good spanking twice a day—once in the morning, once in the evening. That would take the starch out of you!"

And he would get up in a huff and go away,

which was just what she wanted. For some time rumours had been circulating in the courtyard that the Ukrainian had not made overtures to her in vain. This incensed her against him and against anyone else who did not mind his own business. The Ukrainian would march off to the other side of the yard with a smart military step, notwithstanding his forty years.

Suddenly Senka would appear out of nowhere.

"She's a mouthful of red pepper, that Orlov woman," he would whisper in Levchenko's ear, nodding to where Matrona was sitting.

"I'll teach you what red pepper is!" threatened Levchenko, but he smiled to himself. He was fond of the nimble Senka and listened eagerly to whatever he had to say, for Senka knew all the secrets of the courtyard.

"There's no fooling with her," went on Senka, ignoring the threat. "The painter Maxim tried it, and did she mess up his mug for him! I saw it myself. She pounded it like a drum!"

Lively and impressionable, half child and half man though only twelve years old, Senka

absorbed the filth that surrounded him with the ease of a sponge absorbing water. One fine line already extended the length of his forehead, showing that Senka was given to pondering things.

Now it was dark in the courtyard. Above it gleamed a little square of dark blue sky all a-glitter with stars. Seen from above, the yard was like a deep pit lined by tall buildings, and in one corner of this pit sat a little woman recovering from the beating she had been given and waiting for her drunken husband to come home.

The Orlovs had been married for almost four years. A child had been born to them, but it died when only eighteen months old. Both of them grieved over the loss, but soon took comfort in the hope of having another.

The basement room they lived in was long and dark, and it had a vaulted ceiling. Beside the door, facing the windows, was a big Russian stove. A narrow passage between the stove and the wall led into a square opening lighted by two windows giving on to the courtyard. The light fell into the cellar in oblique

and murky shafts, the room was damp and musty and seemed to be cut off from everything else. Life went on up above, but the only signs of it here were the dull nondescript sounds that fell, along with the dust, in colourless flakes down into this hole occupied by the Orlovs. By the wall next to the stove stood a big wooden bed hung with cotton curtains—pink flowers in a yellow field. The cobbler and his wife had breakfast and dinner at a table opposite the bed, and they worked in the space between the bed and the far wall where the two shafts of light fell.

Cockroaches crawled lackadaisically up and down the walls, feasting on the kneaded crumbs of black bread with which pictures cut out of magazines were pasted to the plaster. Languid flies filled the air with a monotonous drone and the fly-spotted pictures formed dark splashes against the dirty-grey background of the walls.

The Orlovs' day began as follows: at six in the morning Matrona woke up, washed herself and heated a battle-scarred samovar covered with pewter patches; while waiting for the samovar to boil she would tidy up the

room and go to the shop, then wake up her husband; by the time he got up and washed himself the samovar would be humming away on the table, and they would sit down to a breakfast of tea and white bread—one pound for the two of them.

Grigory was a good cobbler and always had plenty of work. At breakfast he would enumerate the tasks of the day. He himself did whatever required the skill of a master, leaving to Matrona secondary tasks such as waxing thread, pasting in inner soles and nailing on new heel-taps. At breakfast they also discussed what they would have for dinner. In the winter, when they ate more, this was an interesting topic for discussion; in summer they economized by only lighting the stove on Sundays, and not even every Sunday, and so the main article of their diet was cold soup made of *kvass*, to which they added onions, salt fish, and sometimes meat cooked on one of the neighbour's stoves. Breakfast over, they sat down to work—Grigory on an overturned pickle-tub with a split side and some padded leather on top; his wife on a low stool beside him.

At first they worked in silence—what was there to talk about? They might exchange a few words about their work, but again they would relapse into a silence lasting for half an hour or more. Tap-tap went the hammer, swish-swish went the thread as it was drawn through the leather. Occasionally Grigory would give a yawn that invariably ended up in a roar or a groan. Matrona would sigh. Grigory might sing. His voice had a metallic edge to it, but he sang well. Now the words of the song flocked together in a quick and plaintive recitative that came in rushing out of Grigory's throat as if afraid something might remain unsaid; now they strung themselves out in mournful measures accented by ejaculations of "Ekh!" and floated, loud and doleful, through the window into the courtyard. Matrona would add her mellow contralto to her husband's tenor. The faces of both of them would become sad and pensive; and Grigory's dark eyes would grow dim. The music seemed to stupefy Matrona, who rocked back and forth in a sort of trance, ecstatically breaking off in the middle of a note, then joining in again. Neither of them was conscious of

the other as they sang, as they tried to pour into another's words all the dullness and emptiness of their own benighted lives, as they sought to express in those words the half-formed thoughts and feelings born in their own souls.

At times Grigory would improvise:

Ah, this l-i-i-fe of mine! Ekh, this thrice-cursed life of mine....
Ah, the m-i-isery! Ekh, the accursed misery! The m-i-isery accursed!

Matrona disapproved of these improvisations.

"Stop howling. You sound like a dog before somebody dies."

This always made him indignant.

"Bah, you scarecrow! As if you could understand anything, you blubbering snout-face!"

"Stopped howling and started barking."

"Shut your mouth and mind your own business. Who am I? Your 'prentice, that you should start telling me what to do?"

And Matrona, seeing that the veins in his neck were swelling and an ugly light had come into his eyes, would indeed shut her mouth and keep it shut for a long time, intentionally

ignoring the questions of her husband, whose anger always died down as quickly as it flared up.

She avoided his eyes that were seeking reconciliation and waiting for her smile, and she was filled with a tremulous fear that this toying with his feelings would rouse him to fury. But at the same time she found satisfaction in being angry with him and seeing his efforts to make peace. At least she was living, feeling, thinking!

Both of them were young and healthy, and they loved each other and were proud of each other. Grigory was so strong, so ardent, so handsome, and Matrona was fair and plump, with a sparkle in her grey eyes—a buxom wench, as the people in the courtyard said. They loved each other, but they were bored by life, they had no other interests and no new impressions to bring them relief from each other and satisfy the normal human longing to think and feel—in a word, to live. What they needed was some purpose in life, even though it were nothing but the hoarding of money, coin by coin.

But they did not have this.

Always together, they became used to each other and to each other's every word and gesture. Day after day went by without bringing them any diversion. On holidays they would sometimes visit friends who were as impoverished spiritually as they themselves, and sometimes friends would visit them to sing and drink and, as likely as not, to fight. And then again the uneventful days would drag by like the links of an invisible chain, each with its burden of work and boredom and senseless irritation with each other.

At times Grigory would say:

"Life, the bitch! What do I want with it? Work and mope. Mope and work." After a brief pause he would lift his eyes to the ceiling and go on, the shadow of a smile playing over his lips: "By the will of God my mother brought me into this world—can't say anything against that. Then I learned my trade, but what was *that* for? Aren't there enough cobblers in the world? Very well, I'm a cobbler. What good does it do me? Just sit here in this hole and peg away. And then I'll die. They say the cholera's raging. Let it. Once there was a cobbler named Grigory Orlov and

he died of the cholera. Does that make sense? Who cares whether I lived and made boots and died or not?"

Matrona made no comment, sensing something awesome in her husband's words. Sometimes she would ask him not to say such things for they were against God, who knew only too well what to do with people's lives. Or again, when she was out of sorts, she would declare sarcastically:

"If you'd stop drinking you'd find more joy in life and such thoughts wouldn't come into your head. Instead of complaining, other people save up money to buy their own workshops and live as good as gentlefolk."

"Your words sound tinny and prove you're a ninny. Shake your brains and ask yourself how I can give up drinking when it's the only joy I've got in life. Other people! A lot you know about other people! Was I like this before I got married? If the truth's to be told, it's you that sucks me dry and takes all the joy out of life. Ugh, you toad!"

Matrona was offended, but she could not deny the truth of her husbands words: he *was* gay and affectionate when he was drunk;

those "other people" really were just the product of her imagination; and Grigory had indeed been a merry fellow, very kind-hearted and amusing, before they were married.

"I wonder why. Can it really be that I'm a burden to him?" she asked herself.

She winced at the thought and felt sorry for them both. Going over to him, she looked lovingly into his eyes and nestled against his breast.

"Now she'll start licking me with her tongue, the cow," said Grigory glumly and made as if to push her away, but she only pressed closer, sure he would not repulse her.

At that, fires were kindled in his eyes, he threw down his work and took his wife on his knee, kissing her over and over again, drawing in deep breaths and murmuring to her softly, as if afraid someone might hear.

"Ekh, Matrona, it's a vile life we live, you and me. We snap at each other like wild beasts. And why? Because that's my fate—every man is born under a star, and that star's his fate."

But this explanation did not satisfy him and he drew his wife closer and fell to thinking.

For a long time they would sit thus, in the foul air of their dingy basement. She would sigh and say nothing, but sometimes, in such blissful moments, she would remember the undeserved insults and injuries received at his hands, and then she would weep softly and complain. Touched by her gentle reproaches, he would caress her more fervently and she would grow more tearful. In the end this would annoy him.

"Stop your slobbering! Maybe it hurts me a thousand times worse than it does you when I beat you, d'you hear? So shut your mouth. Give a woman an inch and she'll take a mile. Drop this talk. What's there to say to a man who's sick to death of living?"

At other times he would soften under the flow of her quiet tears and impassioned reproaches, and then he would make a dismal, laboured effort to explain things.

"What's to be done with a man like me? I'm always hurting you, I know that. But I also know you're the only one I've got. True, sometimes I forget it. Sometimes I just can't bear to set eyes on you, Matrona—think of that! As if I'd ate too much of you. And then

such a madness creeps into my heart that I'd like to tear you to pieces, and myself as well. And the more right you are, the harder I want to hit you."

She may not have understood him, but she was comforted by his gentle and contrite tone.

"God willing, we'll get over it—we'll get used to each other," she would say, not realizing that they had long since got used to each other and worn each other out.

"If only a child was born to us, things would be different," she would sigh. "We'd have something to amuse us and to take care of."

"Well, then, why don't you have a child?"

"I can't carry it—not the way you beat me. You always go hard at me in the belly and the side. If only you wouldn't use your feet. . . ."

"H'm," murmured Grigory, taken aback. "As if a man could think where and how to hit at such moments. I'm not a fiend. I don't do it just for fun. It's the misery drives me to it."

"Where does it come from—that misery of yours?" asked Matrona unhappily.

"It's my fate, Matrona," philosophized Grigory. "My fate and my nature. Look at me

—am I worse than another? That Ukrainian, for instance? Yet the misery never gets him. And he's all alone—no wife or anybody. I'd die if I didn't have you. But he don't seem to mind. Just sits there smoking his pipe and smiling, content he has a pipe to smoke, the old devil. But I'm not like that. I was born with this restlessness in my heart. It's my nature. I'm like a steel spring—one touch and it starts quivering. Take this, for instance: I go out for a walk and see this, that, and the other, and here am I without a thing to my name. And it makes me mad. The Ukrainian—he don't mind, he can do without anything. He makes me mad too, damn his whiskers, because he can do without anything, but as for me—there's not a thing I don't want! But I just go on sitting here in this hole, pegging away without a thing to call my own. Or take you—you're my wife, but what of it? You're just a woman like any other, with a full set of a woman's wares. And I know all there is to know about you, even how you'll sneeze tomorrow, because I've heard you sneeze at least a thousand times. So what's there to get excited about? Not a

damn thing. And so I go off to the pub because at least it's cheery there."

"What made you get married?" asked Matrona.

Grigory gave a little laugh.

"The devil only knows," he said. "To tell you the truth, I never ought to have. I ought to have been a tramp. Maybe I'd have gone hungry, but at least I'd have been free to go wherever I pleased. I could have wandered to the ends of the earth."

"You can go now, and let me go free, too," said Matrona, who was on the verge of tears.

"You? Where do you want to go?" asked Grigory grimly.

"That's my business."

"Tell me where!" and his eyes flashed menacingly.

"Don't shout. You can't scare me."

"So you've set your eyes on somebody else, have you? Out with it!"

"Let me go!"

"Go where?" roared Grigory.

He snatched her by the hair, knocking off her kerchief. His violence roused her fury, and her fury brought enormous satisfaction,

stirring her to the depths of her soul, so that, instead of saying the word that would dispel his fears, she fanned the flames, looking him straight in the eye and smiling significantly. He lost control and beat her—beat her mercilessly.

And at night, as she lay moaning beside him in bed, terribly bruised and broken, he glanced at her out of the corner of his eye and sighed profoundly. He felt wretched. His conscience troubled him, for he knew he had no cause for jealousy and had beaten her for no reason at all.

"Come, come, that's enough," he said uneasily. "I suppose I'm to blame. But you're a fine one, too. Why didn't you say something instead of egging me on? Why did you have to do that?"

She did not answer. She knew why. She knew that now, bruised and bleeding as she was, she would have his caresses—the tender, passionate caresses of reconciliation. And for this she was willing to suffer the pain of a broken body every day of her life. And she wept from the very anticipation of delight, before her husband had so much as touched her.

"Come, come, Matrona, come my little pigeon, don't cry, forgive me, lovey," and he stroked her hair and kissed her and clenched his teeth against a bitterness that filled his whole being.

Their windows were open, but a view of the sky was cut off by a brick wall; as always, their room was dark and stuffy and oppressive.

"Ekh, what a life! A dog's life!" whispered Grigory, unable to express all the pain he felt. "It's because of this hole we live in, Matrona. As if we was buried in the earth before our time."

"Let's move to a new place," said Matrona through her tears, taking his words literally.

"It's not that. Even if we moved into an attic we'd still be living in a hole, because it's not this cellar that's the hole—it's life itself."

Matrona considered a moment.

"God willing, things will get better with us," she repeated.

"Things will get better—you're always saying that. But they seem to be getting worse instead of better. We fight more and more often."

And that was true. The intervals between their quarrels had been growing shorter, until now Grigory woke up every Saturday morning with a feeling of enmity towards his wife ripe within him.

"Tonight I'm going to Baldy's pub to get soaked to the gills," he would announce.

Matrona would narrow her eyes and say not a word.

"Nothing to say? That's right. You'll keep your mouth shut if you know what's good for you."

In the course of the day he reminded her of his intention several times, his venom increasing with the approach of evening; he sensed that it hurt her to hear him, and he was infuriated by the obstinate silence that greeted his announcements, and by the cold gleam in her eye that said she was ready to resist him.

And true enough, in the evening Senka Chizhik, herald of their misfortune, would announce the fight.

When he had beaten his wife, Grigory would vanish, often for the night, sometimes for the whole of Sunday as well. On his return Matro-

na, all covered with bruises, would greet him coldly, silently, but filled with secret pity for this man who came back to her, ragged and dirty, with bloodshot eyes, as badly beaten, perhaps, as she herself.

Knowing he would have a hang-over, she would have ready a pint bottle to make it easier. He knew this.

"Give me something," he would say, and when he had gulped down two or three glassfuls, would sit down to work.

All day long he would suffer pangs of conscience; often they were so insufferable that he would toss aside his work and break out into fearful oaths, rushing about the room or throwing himself down on the bed. Matrona would give him time to get over it, and then they would make their peace.

In the early days of their marriage these moments of reconciliation held much that was sweet and poignant, but gradually they grew more matter-of-fact, and at last the couple made their peace merely because it was inconvenient not to speak to each other for the five days that separated them from the next Saturday.

"You'll drink yourself to death," sighed Matrona.

"I will," confirmed Grigory, and spat into the corner with the air of a man to whom it makes not the slightest difference whether he drinks himself to death or not. "And you'll leave me," was the detail he added to the picture of the future, giving her a probing look as he said it.

She dropped her eyes, a thing she would not have done earlier, and Grigory, seeing this, drew his brows together and set his teeth. Without telling her husband, she would go to fortune-tellers and sorceresses, bringing home with her charmed roots or bits of coal. When this proved ineffective, she had a prayer said to the great martyr Saint Boniface, who interceded on behalf of drunkards, and all the while the prayer was being read she knelt and wept profusely, silently working her quivering lips.

More and more often she was possessed by a cold and furious hatred for her husband which gave birth to morbid thoughts, and gradually her heart hardened against this man whose gay laughter and tender words had

filled her life with brightness three years before.

In this way these two people, neither of them bad at heart, went on living day by day, waiting for something to happen that would end the torment of their preposterous way of life.

One Monday morning when the Orlovs were having breakfast, the imposing figure of a policeman appeared in the door-way of their dismal dwelling. Orlov jumped up and made a heroic effort to revive the events of the past few days in his sodden memory as he fixed his dull eyes, shadowed by the most dreary expectations, on the visitor.

"This way, this way," called the policeman to somebody outside.

"It's dark as a dungeon here, devil take that merchant Petunnikov!" came a young and cheerful voice, and the next moment a student in white university uniform entered the basement. He was holding his cap in his hand, his hair was close-cropped, he had a high, sunburnt forehead and brown eyes that flashed jovially behind his glasses.

"Good morning," he said in a deep voice. "Allow me to introduce myself—the sanitary inspector. I've come to see how you're getting on. To sniff the air you breathe—very bad air indeed."

Orlov smiled and gave a sigh of relief. He took to this student at once—his face, with the reddish down on cheeks and chin was so pink, wholesome and kindly. And he smiled in such an exceptional and genial way that the Orlovs' basement room seemed to grow brighter and more cheerful because of it.

"And now, my good people," he went on without stopping, "see that you throw out the garbage more often, because it's the garbage that gives off that bad-tasting smell. And I'd advise you to wash the pail more often, housewife. And why should you be wearing such a long face, my man?" At this he took Orlov's hand and felt his pulse.

The student's breezy manner abashed the Orlovs. Matrona smiled confusedly and watched him without speaking. Grigory's smile was distrustful.

"And how are your tummies?" asked the student. "Don't be bashful—we all have

tummies—and if they're giving you any trouble we'll supply you with various bitters that will put an end to it."

"We're all right. Can't complain," replied Grigory with a little laugh. "If you find me not quite up to the mark, that's because—well, to tell you the truth, I've got a little hang-over."

"True enough, my nose was telling me you'd had a wee bit to drink last night—just the tiniest drop, of course."

He said this in such a comical way and pulled such an absurd face that Grigory burst out laughing. Matrona laughed, too, covering her mouth with her apron. The student laughed loudest and hardest of all, but he was the first to stop. And when the wrinkles of laughter about his puffy lips and eyes were smoothed out, his candid face seemed more candid than ever.

"It's right that a workingman should have his drink—if he knows when to stop. But times are such at present that it would be better to do without it. Have you heard about the disease that is going the rounds?"

And he told them, very gravely and in

simple terms, about the cholera and the means of fighting it. As he spoke he walked about the room, feeling the walls, glancing into the corner where the wash-basin and the slop-bucket stood, stooping down and sniffing at the stove-grate to find out what the smell coming from it could be. In his enthusiasm his bass voice kept breaking into tenor notes; the simple words he used ranged themselves firmly in the memory of his listeners, one after another, of their own accord, without any effort on their part. His eyes shone and his whole being was charged with enthusiasm for the cause he was serving.

A smile of curiosity played over Grigory's face as he watched him. Matrona kept clicking her tongue; the policeman disappeared.

"So start cleaning up this very day. A house is being built down the street and the masons will gladly let you have all the lime you want for five kopeks. And do stop drinking, my man. And now—good-bye for the present. I'll drop in again soon."

He vanished as suddenly as he had come, and the memory of his laughing eyes was registered in the pleased smiles on the faces

of the Orlovs. They were confused by this intrusion of purposeful energy into their benighted lives.

"H'm-m," drawled Grigory, shaking his head. "So that's your chemist for you. And they say they poison people. As if a chap with a mug like that would do such a thing! Not on your life! He came here open and above board, much as to say: here I am, just as you see me! Lime—did you ever hear of that being harmful? And citric acid—what's that? Just plain acid, I guess. But the most important thing is to keep clean—clean floor, clean air, clean slop-bucket. Poison people indeed! A jolly fellow, eh? Says it's right a workingman should have his drink if he knows when to stop—hear that, Matrona? So what about pouring me out a glass? Is there any?"

She gladly poured him out half a glass from a bottle she had got somewhere or other.

"He really was nice. You couldn't help liking him," she said, smiling as she recalled the student's face. "As for the others—who knows? Maybe they really are hired—"

"Hired for what? And who hires them?" broke in Grigory.

"Hired to kill off the people. They say there's an awful lot of poor folks and the order's been given to get rid of the extra ones," said Matrona.

"Who says so?"

"Everybody. The house-painter's cook and lots of others."

"And fools they are to say it. Who would gain by such a thing? Think for yourself: caring for the sick—that costs something, don't it? And then burying them—a coffin and a grave and all the rest. And it all comes out of the treasury. Nonsense. If they really wanted to get rid of people they'd send them to Siberia—plenty of space for everybody out there. Or to a desert island. And make them work. That would be getting rid of them, and very profitable besides. And there's nothing like profit for the treasury, so it's not going to go killing people off and burying them at its own expense. That student, now—he's a trouble-maker, anybody can see that, but what he is up to is uprisings. As for killing people off—you couldn't get him to do it for love or money. Can't you tell by just looking at him he wouldn't do

such a thing? He's not got that kind of mug."

All that day they talked about the student and what he had told them. They recalled his face and the way he laughed, and they discovered that a button had been missing from his coat, and they nearly quarrelled about which side it had been missing from. Matrona insisted it was the right side, her husband said it was the left and cursed her roundly twice on this account, but on remembering that she had not emptied the bottle when pouring out his drink, he gave in to her. They resolved to set about scouring the room the next day, and then, exhilarated by an experience that had been like a breath of fresh air to them, began talking about the student again.

"Ekh, the son of a gun!" said Grigory ecstatically. "Acted as if he'd known us for ten years! Pokes his nose in everywhere, gives us a lecture, and—out he goes. No shouts, no noise, even if he is one of your higher-ups. Damn it all, Matrona, can't you see he really does care? You could tell that from the very start. They want to keep our

bodies and souls together, and not—not—that's all nonsense about poisoning people. Old wives' tales. 'How are your tummies?' he asks. If they wanted to poison us, what the hell would they care about how our tummies were? And how slick he explained about those—what do you call them?—those thing-umajigs that crawl around in your insides?"

"Polywogs, or something like that," laughed Matrona. "But that was said just to scare us, to make us clean up."

"Who knows? Maybe it was all true. After all, dampness does breed worms. Damn it all, what did he call those bugs? Polywogs? No, not that—the word's on the tip of my tongue but I can't spit it out."

Even after they were in bed they went on talking with the naive excitement of children confiding their first striking impressions. And they were still talking when they dropped off to sleep.

They were awakened early the next morning by the house-painters' fat cook. She was standing beside their bed and her face, usually round and red, was drawn and grey.

"Time to be up and about," she said hur-

riedly, flapping her thick lips in an odd way. "The cholera's come to our house. A visitation of the Lord," and she burst into tears.

"Are you crazy?" cried Grigory.

"And I forgot to empty the slop-bucket last night," said Matrona guiltily.

"As for me, dears, I'm quitting my job. I'll go away. Away to the country," said the cook.

"Who's got it?" asked Grigory as he jumped out of bed.

"The accordionist. It caught him in the night. Right in the belly—convulsions, like from arsenic poisoning."

"The accordionist?" muttered Grigory. He could not believe it. Such a jolly, jaunty fellow. Yesterday he had crossed the courtyard with his usual peacock swagger. "I'll go and see him," said Orlov with a dubious laugh.

Both of the women cried out in fright.

"Don't, Grigory, it's catching!"

"God Almighty, don't think of it!"

Grigory swore, thrust his feet into his shoes, and made for the door without combing his hair or buttoning the collar of his shirt. His wife caught him by the shoulder. He felt

the trembling of her hand, and this, for some reason, threw him into a passion.

"I'll smash your face for you! Get away!" he roared, pushing her in the chest.

The courtyard was quiet and empty. As he made his way to the accordionist's door he was seized by a chill of fear, and at the same time he enjoyed the satisfaction of feeling that he alone, of all the people in their house, had the courage to go and see the sick man. This satisfaction was enhanced by the sight of the tailors watching him from their second-story window. He began to whistle and gave a defiant toss of his head. But on reaching the door he met a slight disappointment in the person of Senka Chizhik.

Senka had opened the door a crack and stuck his sharp nose through it; as usual, he was so completely absorbed in his observations that he turned round only when Grigory tweaked his ear.

"It's twisted him all up, Uncle Grigory," he whispered, turning up a smudged face that had grown more pinched than ever under the stress of his latest impressions. "He looks like a dried mushroom."

A whiff of foul air came from the room. Grigory stood there listening to Senka without replying, trying to get a peep at the sick man through the crack in the door.

"Should I give him a drink of water, Uncle Grigory?" asked Senka.

Grigory glanced down into the boy's face; it was twitching all over with nervous agitation, and Grigory himself was agitated.

"Fetch some water," he ordered, and then boldly threw open the door and stood in the door-way, involuntarily straining backwards.

He caught a hazy vision of Kislyakov. The accordionist, dressed in his best clothes, was sprawling with his chest on the table, gripping it tightly with both hands while his feet, in patent-leather boots, moved aimlessly over the wet floor.

"Who is it?" he asked hoarsely and apathetically.

Grigory squared his shoulders and went over to him, stepping gingerly over the floor and trying to speak brightly, even jokingly.

"It's me, Dmitri Pavlovich. What's this, took more than you could hold last night?" He stared hard at Kislyakov, overcome by

fear and curiosity, and had difficulty in recognizing him.

The accordionist's face was drawn, his cheek-bones stuck out in two sharp angles, his eyes, sunken and with greenish spots round them, had a curiously dull and fixed stare, the skin on his cheeks was the colour of a corpse on a hot summer day. Frightening and death-like was his face, and only the faint movement of his jaws proved that he was still alive. For a long time he kept that dull stare fixed on Grigory, and this filled the cobbler with horror. For some reason he plucked at the seams of his trousers as he stood there, some three paces away from the sick man, and he felt as if someone had seized him by the throat with a cold and clammy hand and was slowly strangling him. He wanted to rush out of that room, once so bright and cosy, now strangely cold and filled with the smell of decay.

"Well—" he began, preparing his retreat. A shadow passed over the accordionist's grey face. He opened lips that were edged with black foam and said in a soundless voice:

"I'm—dying."

These two words, pronounced with inexpressible apathy, struck Grigory in the head and chest like two dull blows. He grimaced foolishly and turned to the door, but at that moment Senka rushed in, breathless and all in a sweat, with a pail of water.

"Here—from the Spiridonov's well—they didn't want to give it to me, the sons of bitches."

He put the pail on the floor, dashed into a corner, came back and handed a glass to Grigory, chattering all the while.

"'So you folks have caught the cholera?' he says to me. 'What if we have?' says I. 'We've caught it, and you will, too—it's sure to go the rounds now, like that time in the settlement,' I says. Smack! and he gives me a crack on the bean."

Grigory dipped up a glassful of water and drained it in one draught. His ears were ringing with those lifeless words:

"I'm—dying."

But Senka kept bustling about, never so much in his element.

"Water," murmured the accordionist, moving towards them along with the table.

Senka leaped up and held a glass of water to his discoloured lips. As if in a dream Grigory, who was leaning against the wall near the door, heard the sick man sip the water noisily; then he heard Senka suggest that they undress him and put him to bed; and then came the voice of the house-painters' cook. Her broad face, wearing a look of fear and compassion, was pressed against the window-pane and she said in a tearful voice:

"Give him some rum with soot in it—two spoonfuls of soot to a glassful of rum."

Another person in the courtyard suggested wood-oil mixed with pickle brine and Imperial vodka. Suddenly the light of some remembrance pierced the dense and oppressive gloom that had settled down on Grigory. He rubbed his forehead vigorously, as if to intensify the light, then he turned abruptly and ran out of the room, across the courtyard, and down the street.

"God Almighty, the cobbler's got it! He's run to the hospital," wailed the cook in explanation of Orlov's sudden departure.

Matrona, who was standing next to her,

turned pale, opened wide her eyes and began to shake all over.

"That's a lie," she murmured hoarsely, scarcely moving her lips. "That accursed disease couldn't get Grigory. He wouldn't let it."

But the cook, still wailing, ran off, and five minutes later a little crowd of neighbours and passers-by had gathered in the street in front of merchant Petunnikov's house. The same feelings were expressed on all the faces: excitement, alternating with hopeless despair, malice, forced bravado. With a flash of bare heels Senka would dash out into the courtyard and back again to keep the crowd informed of the accordionist's state.

The people crushed together, filling the smelly air of the street with the hum of their voices, above which could sometimes be heard vicious and meaningless oaths.

"Look! Orlov!"

Orlov was riding up to the gate on the shafts of a waggon driven by a glum-looking man dressed all in white.

"Out of the way!" shouted the driver in a deep voice, turning his horse straight into the crowd.

The sight of the waggon and the shouts of the driver cast a damp over the animation of the crowd. Everyone instantly quieted down and many of the people hurried away.

In the wake of the waggon came the student with whom the Orlovs were acquainted. His cap had slipped to the back of his head, sweat was streaming off his brow, and he was wearing a long robe of blinding whiteness with a large round hole with brown edges burnt into the front of it.

"Well, where's the sick man?" he asked in a loud voice, casting sidelong glances at the people gathered in the corner next to the gate. Their response was hostile.

"Look at the new cook!" someone called out.

"Just wait and see what he'll treat you to!" muttered someone else.

"He'll give you soup that'll make you puke," said the wiseacre to be found in any crowd.

This elicited a cheerless burst of laughter tinged by fear and distrust.

"Look, *they're* not afraid. How do you explain that?" was the insinuating question put by a man with a strained look on his face and a glance full of resentment.

People sobered and their talk became hushed.

"They're carrying him out."

"Orlov, the bastard."

"And he's not afraid?"

"Him, the dirty drunk?"

"Easy, easy, Orlov. Lift his feet higher. That's it. All right, you can drive off, Pyotr," said the student. "I'll be along soon. Well, Orlov, I'll have to ask you to help me clean up this contagion. Incidentally you'll learn how to do it—it may come in handy. Have you any objections?"

"No," said Orlov, feeling very proud as he glanced round.

"I can help, too," put in Senka.

He had accompanied the dread waggon to the gate and returned just in time to offer his services. The student turned his spectacles on him.

"And who might you be?"

"One of the house-painters. Their 'prentice," explained Senka.

"Aren't you afraid of the cholera?"

"Me, afraid?" said Senka in amazement. "Not me! I'm not afraid of nothing!"

"That so? Good. Well, then—" and the student sat down on a barrel lying on the ground and rocked back and forth as he explained to Grigory and Senka how important it was to keep themselves clean.

Matrona came up with an anxious smile on her face. Behind her came the cook, wiping her eyes on her greasy apron. In a little while they were joined by a few other people, who approached as stealthily as a cat creeps up on a sparrow. In the end there were about ten people pressing about the student, and this inspired him. He stood in the centre of them, gesticulating vigorously as he launched on a lecture that one minute brought smiles to the faces of his listeners, the next an expression of rapt attention, undisguised distrust, or jeering scepticism.

"The most important means of combating all disease is cleanliness—cleanliness of the body and of the air you breathe," he told them.

"God Almighty!" groaned the house-painters' cook. "The only thing that's sure to spare you an untimely death is praying to the holy martyr Saint Barbara."

"Lots of people live clean and breathe clean, and they die anyway," declared one of the listeners.

Orlov stood next to his wife watching the student and turning something over in his mind. He felt a little tug at his sleeve.

"Uncle Grigory," whispered Senka, his eyes glowing like coals. "Looks like Kislyakov's going to die and he hasn't got no relatives. Who'll get his accordion?"

"Shut up, you little rascal," said Orlov, waving him off.

Senka walked away and stood peering through the window of the accordionist's room, searching for something with his eyes.

"Lime, tar . . ." enumerated the student in a loud voice.

In the evening of that turbulent day Matrona said to her husband as they were having supper:

"Where did you go with that student today?"

Grigory looked at her absently without answering.

He had gone off with the student after fumigating the accordionist's room, and had

come back at three in a thoughtful and taciturn mood. Throwing himself on the bed, he had lain there until supper-time without uttering a single word, although his wife had tried more than once to make him speak. He did not even swear at her, and the strangeness and unnaturalness of this made her uneasy.

With the instinct of a woman whose whole life was centred in her husband, she suspected him of having been caught up by some infatuation, and fear of this fanned her curiosity. What could be troubling him?

"Maybe you're not feeling well, Grigory?"

He gulped down the last mouthful of tea in his saucer, wiped his moustache on the back of his hand and unhurriedly pushed his empty glass across the table to his wife.

"I went to the barracks with the student," he said with a frown.

"To the cholera barracks?" exclaimed Matrona; and then, in an awed whisper: "Are there many people there?"

"Fifty-three, counting our accordionist. Some are getting better—they're up already. Yellow and skinny."

"People who've had the cholera? I don't believe it. They probably took in a few others just for appearances—to make it look as if they was able to cure them."

"You're a fool," said Grigory curtly, anger flashing in his eyes. "All of you here are thick-heads. Stupid and ignorant, that's what you are. It's enough to kill a man, living with such blockheads. You just can't get a thing into those heads of yours." He snatched up his refilled glass and grew silent again.

"And where did you get to know so much?" asked Matrona caustically, heaving a sigh.

He said nothing—unapproachably severe and thoughtful. The cooling samovar sang a wheezy little tune. Through the window drifted smells of paint, carbolic acid, and the disturbed garbage pit; the dusk, the smells, and the wheeze of the samovar all merged into one, and the black stove-opening glowered at the man and his wife as if it meant to gobble them up at the first opportunity. The couple crunched at their lumps of sugar, rattled their dishes, swallowed their tea. Matrona sighed frequently, Grigory drummed on the table with his fingers.

"You never saw anything so clean!" he burst out unexpectedly. "Every single one of the people who work there is dressed in white. The sick ones get baths every minute. And wine, at two-and-a-half a bottle. And the food they eat? One whiff's enough to fill your belly. As for the way they're looked after—a mother's care. H'm. Where's the sense? A man lives for years and years without anybody caring enough even to spit on him, let alone drop in and ask how he is and how life's treating him. But the minute he takes it into his head to die they won't let him. Why, they half kill themselves to keep him alive. Barracks, and wine at two-and-a-half a bottle. Can't they see there's no sense in it? They put out a hell of a lot of money for wine and barracks; couldn't they spend the same money on making life easier for him when he's well—a little bit every year?"

His wife made no effort to understand what he said; it was enough for her that he was saying something new, and the conclusion she correctly drew was: whatever was seething in Grigory's soul boded ill for her. She wanted to know just how it would af-

fect her, and to know it as soon as possible. And this desire was fraught with fear and hope and a certain hostility towards her husband.

"They probably know what they're doing better than you do," she said, pursing her lips, when he had finished.

Grigory shrugged his shoulders, threw her a sidelong glance, and after a moment's pause went on with even more asperity in his tone:

"That's their business, whether they do or they don't. But if I'm the one to die without having had a decent taste of life, then I'm the one to say what's what. And here's what I say: I've had my fill of this sort of life, and I don't intend to sit and wait for the cholera to come and tie me up in knots. I can't. Pyotr Ivanovich says: throw yourself straight at it—you against fate, fate against you, and see who wins. An open fight and no mercy shown. In other words—I'm to go and work at the barracks, and that's that. Understand? Put my head in the lion's jaws—if it bites it off, I'll just jerk my legs. Twenty rubles a month and maybe a bonus besides.

It may cost me my life? Right, but I'll croak sooner if I stay here."

Grigory brought his fist down so hard on the table that the dishes jumped up.

At the beginning of his speech Matrona had listened with an anxious and inquiring look on her face; as he finished she narrowed her eyes disapprovingly.

"Was it the student who advised you to do this?" she asked with restraint.

"I've got a mind of my own; I can think for myself," said Orlov evasively.

"Well, and what did he advise you to do with me?" went on Matrona.

"With you?" The question caught him unawares; he had not yet had time to consider his wife. He could leave her at home. Other men left their wives at home, but it would be dangerous to leave Matrona. You had to keep an eye on her. Struck by that realization, he scowled and said, "You'll go on living here. I'll bring you my wages."

"I see," said his wife serenely, and then she gave that meaningful woman's smile that is sure to produce a stab of jealousy in a man's heart.

Grigory, who was highly sensitive, instantly felt it. But his pride would not let him show his feelings to his wife.

"Woof-woof, quack, quack—that's all you can say." He waited for her reply.

But she only smiled that tantalizing smile again and said nothing.

"We, how's it to be?" snapped Grigory.

"What's that?" asked Matrona, who was calmly wiping the glasses.

"You snake! None of your airs, or I'll let you have it!" fumed Grigory. "Maybe it's to my death I'm going."

"It's not me that's sending you. Don't go."

"You'd be only too glad to send me. I know you," he cried sardonically.

Again she said nothing. This infuriated him, but he restrained his usual outburst—restrained it because of a most cunning idea, or so he considered it, that had just flashed through his mind.

"I know you'd be only too glad to see me caught in some shambles, but you just wait!" he gloated. "I know a trick or two myself. I'll show you!"

He jumped up, snatched his cap off the win-

dow-sill and went out, leaving his wife regretting her tactics, resenting his threats, and full of apprehension for the future.

"O Lord, O Holy Virgin, Queen of Heaven," she breathed.

For a long time she went on sitting at the table trying to guess what Grigory was up to. In front of her were washed dishes; the setting sun cast a rosy spot of light on the white wall opposite their window; the wall refracted it into their basement and it was caught on the edge of the glass sugar-bowl standing in front of Matrona. This meagre brightness caught her attention, and she sat staring at it with wrinkled brow until her eyes ached. Then she put away the dishes and went to bed.

It was dark when Grigory came back. By the sound of his step on the stairs she could tell he was in a good humour. He made his way to the bed, cursing the darkness in the room, and sat down beside her.

"Guess what," he said with a little laugh.

"What?"

"You're going to work there with me."

"Where?" she asked in a trembling voice.

"In the same barracks where I'll be," he announced triumphantly.

She threw her arms about his neck, squeezed him hard and kissed him on the lips. This was so unexpected that he pushed her away.

She's making believe, he thought. She don't want to work there at all, the minx. She's just making believe—thinks her husband's a damn fool, the little hussy.

"What're you doing that for?" he demanded suspiciously, feeling a sudden urge to throw her on the floor.

"Just because," she answered glibly.

"None of your tricks! I know you!"

"Ruslan, my gallant knight!"

"Drop it! I'll show you!"

"Grigory, my love!"

"Listen, do you mean it?"

When his spirits had been somewhat subdued by her caresses, he turned to her anxiously and said:

"Aren't you scared?"

"What of? We'll be together, won't we?" she answered simply.

It was pleasant to hear her say that.

"That's nice of you," he exclaimed, and pinched her so hard that she let out a squeal.

On the Orlovs' first day at the barracks, a great many new patients were brought in, and the two tiros, used as they were to the slow and even tenor of their lives, felt lost and terrified in the midst of this seething activity. They were confused at their own clumsiness, their difficulty to understand what they were told to do, and at the ghastly impressions they received. They did their best, but only succeeded in getting in other people's way. On several occasions Grigory felt that he deserved being shouted at or given a severe reprimand for his incompetence, but to his great surprise nobody shouted at him.

When one of the doctors—a tall man with a black moustache, an aquiline nose and a big wart over his right eyebrow—told Grigory to help one of the patients into the bath, Grigory seized the sick man under the arms with such a will that he let out a cry and grimaced with pain.

"You mustn't break him to bits, friend;

he's to be put in the bath all of a piece," said the doctor gravely.

Grigory was ashamed. The patient, a tall lanky fellow, forced a smile and said:

"He's new at it; he hasn't learned yet."

As soon as the Orlovs arrived at the barracks an old doctor with a pointed grey beard and large glistening eyes gave them a talk on how to treat the patients, how to hold them when carrying them from one place to another, and what to do in various circumstances. In conclusion he asked Grigory and Matrona if they had had baths and gave them each a white apron. The doctor had a soft voice and spoke quickly; the Orlovs liked him immensely. People in white kept rushing past, orders were given and caught on the fly, patients moaned and groaned, water splashed and flowed, and all these sounds were borne on air so densely saturated with unpleasant odours that every word spoken by a doctor, every groan emitted by a patient, seemed to have its own stinging odour.

At first Grigory could perceive nothing but chaos here. He was sure he would never

be able to fit in—that he would suffocate and fall ill. But in a few hours he became infected by the energy diffused everywhere; he grew alert, eager to find a means of being useful, for he sensed that he would feel better and calmer if he joined in the bustle.

"Bichloride of mercury!" called out a doctor.

"Hot water!" ordered a thin student with red and swollen eyelids.

"Hey, you—what's your name? Orlov? Rub this fellow's legs. This way. That's right, that's right. Easier, you don't want to take the skin off," said another student, long-haired and pock-marked, as he showed Grigory how to massage.

"They've brought another patient," somebody announced.

"Carry him in, Orlov."

And Grigory—dazed, sweating, with bleary eyes and foggy mind—did his best. At times he was so overwhelmed by his impressions that he lost a sense of his own existence. Green spots around glazed eyes in earth-coloured faces, limbs that seemed to have been whittled down by disease, sticky smelly skin,

the horrible convulsions of bodies scarcely alive—all these things caused him pangs in the heart and sickness in the stomach.

Once or twice he caught fleeting glimpses of his wife in the corridor of the barracks. She had grown thinner, her face was grey and wore a distracted look.

"How are things?" he once asked.

She gave him a wan smile and went on without a word.

Grigory was struck by a thought that was unnatural to him: maybe he had been wrong to drag his woman into this accursed place; she might catch something. And so the next time he saw her he called out sternly:

"See that you wash your hands often! Take good care of yourself!"

"And if I don't?" she flung back, baring her small white teeth in a grin.

That made him angry. A fine place to joke in, the little fool! What a low lot they were, women! But Matrona caught the flash of his eye, and before he had time to retort she had disappeared in the women's ward.

A few minutes later he was carrying a policeman of his acquaintance to the morgue.

The policeman swayed quietly on the stretcher, his eyes fixed in a glassy stare on the hot bright sky. Grigory gazed at him in dull horror; only three days before he had met him on his beat and had even sworn at him (he had a little score to settle with this particular policeman). And now here he lay, this man who had been so robust and pugnacious—dead, hideous, distorted by convulsions.

Grigory felt that there was something wrong in this: why should a person be born into this world only to be carried off in a single day by such a loathsome disease? He glanced down at the policeman and felt sorry for him.

And then all of a sudden the left hand of the corpse stirred and straightened, and the left side of his twisted mouth that had been hanging half-open, fell shut.

"Stop! Pronin—" gasped Grigory as he put his end of the stretcher down, "—he's alive."

The man at the other end turned round and stared steadily at the dead man for a moment.

"What're you lying for?" he said tartly. "He just straightened his arm for the coffin, don't you know that? Come along."

"But he moved," insisted Grigory, shaking with terror.

"Come along, you queer egg. Can't you understand what you're told? He straightened his arm for the coffin, I say, so of course he moved. Your ignorance'll get you in trouble one of these days. Alive! A fine thing to say about a dead corpse! Want to start trouble? See you don't say a word to nobody about their moving. They all do it. The news'd spread all over town, the flea'd get turned into an elephant, and then there'd be hell to pay. Burying people alive! Folks'd come swarming here and knock the lights out of us. Out of you, too. Here, dump him off on the left."

The man's unruffled voice and unhurried gait had a passifying influence on Grigory.

"Don't lose heart, you'll get used to it. Not a bad place, this. Good food, good treatment, and all the rest. We'll all be corpses some day, nothing surer. And in the meantime, keep a stiff upper lip—that's the main thing. Do you drink?"

"Yes," said Grigory.

"Good. I've got a bottle hid in a hole over

there — what if we go over and take a swig?"

So over they went to the hole behind the barracks and took a swig, and then Pronin poured a few drops of peppermint on a lump of sugar and handed it to Grigory, saying:

"Eat this to take the smell away. They're very strict about vodka here—say it's bad for you."

"Have you got used to this place?" asked Grigory.

"Me? I've been here from the very first. All the people I've seen kick the bucket! It's not exactly a restful sort of life, but it's not bad. The Lord's work. Like in battle. Ever heard about war nurses and medics? I saw a lot of them in the Turkish campaign. At Ardagan and Kars. Those people are braver than us soldiers. We go into battle with guns in our hands, with bullets and with bayonets. But they go walking about in a hail of bullets like they was taking a stroll in the garden. They drag us or the Turks off the field to the hospital and all the while the bullets go whizz! bing! bang! Sometimes a medic

gets hit in the back of the head—ping!—and it's all over."

Grigory felt better after this talk and a good stiff drink of vodka.

"No dropping the reins once you've picked them up," he said to himself as he rubbed the legs of one of the patients. Behind him someone was moaning and calling plaintively:

"Water. Oh-h-h, please, somebody. . . ."

"Ouch! Hotter! It helps, d-d-doctor. Honest to G-g-god. Do let them add some more b-b-boiling water!"

"Give him some wine," called out Doctor Vaschenko.

As Grigory swung into the work he saw that things were not really as horrible and repulsive as they had seemed at first, and what he had taken for chaos was the proper functioning of a great and intelligent force. Yet he shuddered and glanced furtively out of the window into the courtyard every time he remembered the policeman. He believed him to be dead, but his belief was vacillating. What if the policeman should suddenly jump up and let out a cry? And he recalled having heard someone say that the victims of

cholera had once leaped up out of their coffins and run away.

His thoughts frequently turned to his wife. How was she taking it? Sometimes he had a fleeting impulse to steal a moment from his work to go and have a look at Matrona. But he was ashamed of such impulses and would mentally say to her:

"Go ahead and wear yourself out, fatty. You'll get thin here, all right. And that'll nip your fine plans in the bud."

He always suspected his wife of harbouring intentions humiliating to him as her husband. When his suspicions led him to take an objective view of the matter, he was forced to admit she had just cause for habouring such intentions. It was a puny little life she lived. All sorts of ideas could creep into one's head from such a life. This objective approach was enough to transform his suspicions into conviction, at least for the time being. Now he would ask himself why he had ever climbed out of his basement into this boiling cauldron? And he was at a loss to find an answer. But his cogitating went on somewhere deep down inside of him, and the strained

attention with which he followed the activities of the doctors served, as it were, as a barrier preventing his thoughts from interfering with his job. Never before had he seen people work as selflessly as they did here, and he thought, as he looked at the weary faces of the doctors and students, that here were people who really did earn the money they got.

When his work was over at the end of the day, the exhausted Grigory went into the courtyard of the barracks and lay down under the window of the chemist shop. His head throbbed, he had a gnawing pain in his stomach, and his feet ached. Without a thought or desire, he stretched out on the grass and lay gazing up at some fleecy clouds richly tinged by the setting sun, and soon he was fast asleep.

He dreamt that he and his wife were being entertained by one of the doctors in an enormous room whose walls were lined with straight-backed chairs. On these chairs were sitting all the patients from the barracks. The doctor and Matrona were doing a staid Russian dance in the middle of the floor and he himself was

playing the accordion and laughing because the doctor's long legs did not bend and he looked for all the world like a crane in a bog as he followed Matrona round the room with pompous ceremony. And all of the patients, too, were rocking with laughter.

Suddenly the policeman appeared in the door-way.

"Aha!" he cried menacingly. "So you thought I had died, did you, Grigory? Threw me in the morgue, and here you are playing the accordion! Well, come along with me. Get up!"

Grigory sat up quickly, trembling all over and in a cold sweat. Doctor Vaschenko was squatting across from him.

"What kind of an attendant are you, my friend, if you sleep on the ground, and even on your stomach?" he said reproachfully. "If you chill your stomach you'll find yourself laid up, and before you know it you may be dead. That won't do, my man. You've been given a bed inside the barracks, haven't they told you? You're sweating and you've caught a chill. Come along, I'll give you something to take."

"I was feeling sort of tired," murmured Grigory.

"All the worse. You've got to take care of yourself. There's danger about, and we need you, man."

Grigory followed the doctor down the corridor in silence; as silently he gulped down some medicine out of one glass, then out of another, made a face and spat.

"Now go and get some sleep," said the doctor, and went striding off on his long thin legs.

Grigory watched him go, and then suddenly, with a broad grin, ran after him.

"Thanks, doctor."

"What for?" he asked.

"For your trouble. You can be sure I'll do my very best for you. I appreciate your going to such pains for me . . . and . . . and needing me and all that. Thanks a lot."

The doctor stared in astonishment at this barracks attendant whose face was radiant with some new joy, and presently his own face broke into a smile.

"You're a queer fellow," he said. "But that's all right, in fact it's very nice, very

sincere. Go ahead and do your best—not for me, but for the patients. We've got to save people from this disease—snatch them out of its claws, so to speak. We *will* do our best to get the better of it, won't we? But first go and get some sleep."

A minute later Grigory was in bed and drowsing off, pleasantly aware of something warm and soothing inside his stomach. He felt happy, and he was proud to have exchanged those few simple words with the doctor.

His last thought on falling asleep was that it was too bad Matrona had not heard them. He would tell her all about it the next day. But she wouldn't believe him, the little pepper-box.

He was awakened by his wife's voice the next morning.

"Time to go and have your tea, Grigory," she said.

He raised his head and looked at her. She smiled at him. Her hair was neatly combed and she looked wonderfully clean and fresh in her white outfit.

It was pleasant to see her looking like this,

but he was disturbed by the thought that this was how she looked to other men in the barracks, too.

"Whose tea am I to drink? I have my own tea—why should I go anywhere for it?" he said sullenly.

"I'll go with you—we'll have tea together," she said, gazing at him with a soft look in her eyes.

Grigory averted his own eyes and said he would come.

When she went out he lay back again and fell to thinking.

"What's got into her? Inviting me to have tea with her, and looking at me like that. . . . She looks thinner." He felt sorry for her and wanted to do something to please her. Perhaps he would buy some sweets for tea. But he rejected this idea while he was getting washed. No sense in spoiling a woman. She could do without the sweets.

They had their tea in a tiny little room with two windows that looked out on a field steeped in the golden light of the rising sun. Dew still sparkled on the grass near the windows, and far away, in the rosy haze of

early morning, they could see the line of trees marking the post-road. The sky was clear and a breeze wafted the smell of moist earth and grasses through the window.

The table stood against the wall between the windows, and at the table sat three people: Grigory, Matrona and a friend of Matrona's—a tall thin middle-aged woman with a pock-marked face and kindly grey eyes. Her name was Filitsata Yegorovna, she was unmarried, her father had been a Collegiate Assessor, and she always boiled the water for her tea in her own samovar because she could not bear to drink water boiled in the hospital tank. All this she announced to Orlov in a cracked voice, and then, having invited him to sit down next to the window and fill his lungs with "genuinely heavenly air," she went out.

"Did you get tired yesterday?" Grigory asked his wife.

"Just awful," she replied vivaciously. "I thought my feet would drop off and I was so dizzy I couldn't understand a thing they said to me. I was scared to death I'd flop right over—hardly held out till evening—kept

praying all the time. 'Help me, Lord,' I kept saying."

"Are you afraid?"

"I'm afraid of the dead ones. Do you know—" she leaned over and said in an awed whisper: "—they move when they're dead, honest to goodness they do."

"I saw that myself," said Grigory with a deprecating little laugh. "Yesterday Nazarov, the policeman, almost gave me a sock in the jaw after he was dead. I was carrying him to the morgue and all of a sudden he gives a swing with his left—I hardly had time to duck. How do you like that?" He had exaggerated a bit, but it came of itself, without any intention on his part.

He enjoyed having tea in this bright clean room with windows looking out on the boundless green fields and blue sky. And there was something else he liked, but he was not sure whether it was his wife or himself. But most of all he wanted to show the best side of his nature, to be the hero of the day.

"Once I set to work in earnest, the ground'll sizzle under my feet, you'll see. And I have

my reasons. For one thing, the people here—they don't belong to this world."

And he told her about the talk he had had with the doctor, again exaggerating without noticing it, and this put him in an even better humour.

"For another thing, the work itself. It's a great work—something like war, for instance: cholera on one side, patients on the other, and who'll win? It's work that takes brains, and everything's got to be just so. After all, what *is* the cholera. That's a thing you've got to know, and then hit it for all you're worth, right in the weak spot. Doctor Vaschenko said to me: 'And you're just the fellow we need for that, Orlov,' he says. 'Go right after it,' he says, 'drive it out of their feet into their bellies, and there,' he says, 'I'll catch it with something good and bitter. And that'll be the end of it, and the patient'll get well and be thankful to me and you all his life, because who kept him from dying? We did!'" and Grigory stuck out his chest and looked at his wife with shining eyes.

She smiled back at him wistfully. He looked very handsome at this moment, very much

like the Grigory she had known before they were married.

"We've got people like that in our ward, too—so kind-hearted and hard-working. There's one doctor—a big fat woman in glasses. Awfully nice people, without any airs, and you can always understand what they say to you."

"So you don't mind? You're content?" asked Grigory, whose exhilaration had somewhat abated.

"Me? Lord, you can judge for yourself: I get twelve rubles, you get twenty, all together thirty-two rubles a month and no expenses at all. Look how much we'll be able to save up by winter if the cholera keeps up. God willing, we'll manage to crawl out of that basement of ours."

"H'm, that's something to think about," mused Grigory. After a little pause he struck his wife on the back in an upsurge of hope and exclaimed, "Ekh, Matrona, the sun'll be shining on us, too, one of these days! Just you keep your chin up!"

She was radiant.

"If only you don't—"

"Not a word about that! 'Choose your needle by the leather, your boots by the weather.' If our life's different, it'll be different, too."

"Ah, merciful heavens, if only it'd be like that!"

"None of that now!"

"Grigory, love!"

They were filled with new feeling for each other when they parted, and their hopes made them gay and courageous and ready to work their fingers to the bone.

Several times in the next three or four days Grigory was complimented on his quickness and efficiency, and at the same time he noticed that Pronin and a few other attendants were jealous of him and tried to do him little injuries. He grew wary and developed a dislike for the fat-faced Pronin with whom he had been willing to make friends and have "heart-to-heart" talks. It was very painful to see the undisguised attempts of his comrades to spite him.

"The scoundrels," he said to himself, and set his jaw, determined to lose no opportunity of returning tit for tat. Involuntarily

his thoughts turned to his wife—he could tell her everything without fear of her envying his success or pouring carbolic acid on his boots as Pronin had done.

The succeeding days were just as busy and exciting as the first had been, but Grigory did not become so worn out, because with every day he expended his strength more rationally. He learned to recognize the smells of the different medicines, and when he had made the acquaintance of ether he used to take great whiffs of it on the sly, having discovered that it gave almost as pleasurable results as a sizable glass of vodka. The doctors and students got to like him more and more for his quickness in grasping orders, his kindness and loquacity, and his ability to entertain the patients. The sum total of impressions gained from this new way of life induced in Grigory a mood that was curiously exalted. He felt that he was a person of uncommon parts. And within him was born a desire to do something that would attract everyone's attention to himself—something that would astound everyone. This was no more or less than the desire for self-assertion on the part

of a creature who had suddenly come to recognize himself as a human being, but who, still entertaining doubts of a fact so new to him, sought a means of convincing himself and others of its reality. Little by little his desire for self-assertion became transformed into a thirst to perform some great feat of self-sacrifice.

Such a frame of mind led Grigory to take unnecessary risks. One day, for instance, he overstrained himself by carrying a heavy patient from his bed into the bath all alone, without waiting for help. He undertook the care of the dirtiest patients, was contemptuous of the danger of contagion, and accepted the dead with a simplicity that verged on cynicism. But this was not enough for him. He yearned to do something big, and this yearning grew and grew, tormenting him and driving him to a state of despondency. At such times he poured out his heart to his wife, for he had no one else to talk to.

One evening when their work was over and they had had their supper, the couple went for a walk in the fields. The barracks had been built at some distance from town in a

long green valley bordered by a dark strip of woods on one side and a line of city dwellings on the other. To the north the field stretched off into the distance, where its green expanses merged with the dim blue horizon; to the south it was cut off by a cliff that followed the course of the river. Along this cliff went the post-road with its line of old and spreading trees set at even intervals. The sun was setting, and above the dark green foliage of the orchards flared the crosses of the churches, throwing back the light in golden rays; the windows of the houses on the outskirts likewise reflected the red flames of the sunset, music was being played somewhere, a smell of resin came from a ravine thickly overgrown with young firs and spruce, the woods poured their heavy perfume into the air, warm gusts of fragrant wind swept gently towards the town. It was lovely in those broad empty fields—so quiet, and so sweetly sad.

Grigory and Matrona walked over the fields in silence, glad to be drinking in this pure air instead of the smells of the barracks.

"I wonder where that music's coming

from—the town or the camp?" Matrona asked her husband, who was plunged in thought.

She did not like him to become thoughtful. He seemed strange and far away at such times, and they saw so little of each other now that she treasured every moment.

"Music?" asked Grigory like one roused from a dream. "To hell with it, that music! You ought to hear the music playing in my soul! That's real music!"

"What are you saying?" asked Matrona, glancing anxiously into her husband's face.

"I—I don't know. I only know that my heart's on fire. It's space I need—space, so that I could let go with all my strength. Ekh, there's just nothing that could get the better of this strength in me! If, for instance, this cholera was turned into a man, a giant—say Ilya Muromets himself—wouldn't I give it to him, just! A fight to the death! You're strong, and so is Grigory Orlov, so come on, let's see who'll win! I'd squeeze the life out of him and then I'd lie down and die myself. And they'd put a cross on my grave out in the fields, saying: 'Here lies Grigory Andrey-

evich Orlov, who freed Russia of the cholera.' Nothing more."

His face shone and his eyes flashed as he spoke.

"My big strong man!" murmured Matrona, pressing close to him.

"I'd throw myself against a hundred daggers if I thought any good would come of it. If it would make life any easier. Because I've had a glimpse of what people can be—doctor Vaschenko, for instance, and that student Khokhryakov. You'd never believe the way they work! It's a marvel they're still alive. And do you think they do it for money? Nobody'd work like that for money. That doctor's got a nice little pile, and some more besides, you can be sure of that. But when the old doctor took sick last time, Vaschenko worked four days without even taking off-time to go home. Money don't count with them. It's pity that counts. Pity for others, but no pity for themselves. Who do they pity? Anybody. Mishka Usov, for instance, and Mishka's place is in jail, as everybody knows, because Mishka's a thief and maybe worse. But they did their best to help Mishka get better. And

when he got out of bed they were so glad they just laughed. And I want to have a taste of that gladness—lots and lots of it—enough to drown in. Because it hurts just to stand there and watch while they're laughing with gladness. It makes me ache and burn all over. Ekh, damn it all!"

And Grigory grew thoughtful again.

Matrona said nothing, but her heart was beating painfully. She was frightened by her husband's vehemence. Behind his words she distinctly perceived the intensity of his yearning, a yearning she did not understand because she did not try to. It was her husband who was dear and essential to her, and not some abstract hero.

They came to the edge of the ravine and sat down side by side. The curly crowns of young birches looked up at them. Blue mist clung to the bottom of the ravine, and out of its depths rose a smell of dampness, pine needles, and last year's leaves. From time to time a breeze blew, the boughs of the birches swayed, and so did the little fir-trees. The whole ravine was filled with a timid tremulous murmur, as if someone whom the trees loved

dearly had fallen asleep in the shelter of their branches, and they were whispering to each other ever so softly, fearful of waking him up. Lights flashed on in the town—bright flowers against the dark background of the orchards. The Orlovs sat without speaking, he drumming on his knee with his fingers, she gazing up at him and sighing softly.

Suddenly she threw her arms about his neck and put her head on his breast.

"Grigory, my darling, my love!" she whispered. "How wonderful you are to me again, my big strong man! It's as if we were living like we did when we were just married. You never say anything to hurt me any more, and you talk to me all the time, telling me what's in your heart, and you don't beat me. . . ."

"Is that what you're longing for? I can give you a thumping if you want it," he joked tenderly, caught up in a wave of love and pity for his wife.

He began to stroke her hair and found it pleasant—so fatherly—as if she were a child. And Matrona really was like a child, curled up in a soft warm ball in his arms and nestling against his breast.

"Darling," she murmured.

He took a deep breath and words that were new to him and to her came pouring out of his mouth of their own accord.

"My little kitten. Say what you will, but there's no friend like your husband. And you keep looking round for someone else. If I was hard on you sometimes, that was just because of the misery. Living there in that hole, never seeing the light, not knowing what people were really like. My eyes were opened as soon as I got out of that hole, but I was blind until then. Now I know that, say what you will, your wife's your best friend. Because, to tell you the truth, most people are just vermin. All they want is to give people boils. Pronin and Vasyukov, for instance. But they can go to—sh, not a word, Matrona! We'll come round yet, just you keep your chin up! We'll start to live decent and sensible. Come, what's the matter, you little simpleton?"

She was weeping tears of happiness and she answered his question with kisses.

"Love," he whispered and kissed her in turn.

And so both of them kissed each other's tears away, and both tasted their salty flavour. And for a long time Grigory went on uttering words that were new to him.

It grew dark. The star-strewn sky gazed down on the earth in solemn sadness, and the fields were as quiet as the sky.

They had formed the habit of having breakfast together. On the morning after their talk in the fields, Grigory came to his wife's room looking glum and self-conscious. Felitsata was ill and so Matrona was alone. She turned a radiant face to him, but it clouded instantly.

"What's the matter? Aren't you well?"

"I'm all right," he answered coldly, taking his chair.

"Then what is it?"

"I couldn't sleep. Lay awake thinking. The way we billed-and-cooed, you and me, last night—regular softies. And now I'm ashamed of myself. That won't do. You women are always thinking of ways of twisting a man round your little finger. But don't think you can do that to me! Nothing'll come

of it. You can't trap me; I'll not fall for your wiles, and don't you forget it!"

He said this with great emphasis, but without looking at his wife. Matrona kept her eyes on his face and her lips were oddly twisted.

"So you're sorry you and me were so close last night, are you?" she murmured. "Sorry you kissed me and loved me, is that it? If you only knew how it hurts to hear you say such a thing! You'll break my heart with your cruel words. What is it you want? Are you tired of me? Don't you love me any more, or what?"

She looked at him suspiciously, and there was bitterness and challenge in her tone.

"N-no," said Grigory uncomfortably, "but on the whole—you know what kind of a life you and me lived. The very thought of it's enough to turn your stomach. And now we've climbed out of it—and—I'm scared. Everything changed so sudden. It's as if I was a different man, and you, too. What does it mean? What will happen next?"

"Whatever God wills, Grigory," said Matrona gravely. "But don't you be sorry you was so loving last night."

"All right, drop it," cut in Grigory, again feeling self-conscious. I don't expect anything to come of our life together. The old life was none too rosy, but this new one don't suit me either. Even if I don't drink, or beat you, or swear. . . ."

She gave a hysterical little laugh.

"You have no time to do any of those things now," she said.

"I could always find time to drink," smiled her husband. "But I don't want to—that's the marvel! And on the whole--I don't know whether it's because I'm ashamed —or afraid—" he threw back his head and fell to thinking.

"The Lord only knows what's the matter with you," said Matrona with a profound sigh. "It's a good life we live here, even if we do work hard. The doctors like you, you don't let yourself do anything you shouldn't —what else do you want? You're such a restless creature!"

"That's the truth, I am restless. All night I kept thinking: Pyotr Ivanovich says all people are equal, and aren't I just like anybody else? But Doctor Vaschenko is better

than me, and so is Pyotr Ivanovich and lots of others. In other words, they're not my equal and I'm not theirs and I know it. They cured Mishka Usov and were glad of it and I can't understand a thing like that. Why be glad because a person's cured? The life he leads is worse than cholera convulsions if the truth be told. They know this, and still they're glad. And I'd like to be glad like they are, but I can't. Because—what's there to be glad about, when you come right down to it?"

"But they feel sorry for people," objected Matrona. "In our ward, too, you ought to see what goes on when a woman starts to get better! And if she's poor, they give her money and medicine and advice when they send her home. It makes you want to cry, they're so good."

"Cry? It just makes me surprised, that's all." Grigory shrugged his shoulders, scratched his head and gave his wife a puzzled look.

In a sudden burst of eloquence she began to prove to him that people ought to be pitied. She leaned towards him, her soft eyes fixed on his face, and talked about people and the

hardness of their lives, and he gazed back at her and thought:

"She talks good! Where does she get the words from?"

"And you pity them, too. Didn't you say you'd squeeze the life out of the cholera if you had the strength? And yet why should you? Life's been better for you since the cholera came."

Grigory burst out laughing.

"That's the truth! It really has been better. Ekh, damn it all! People dying and me getting on better because of it! That's life for you!"

Still laughing, he got up and went to work. As he was walking down the corridor he thought what a pity it was no one else had heard what Matrona said. "A pretty speech she made. She may be a woman, but she understands a thing or two." He was in a pleasant frame of mind when he went into the men's ward, from which came the moans and the hoarse breathing of the patients.

Matrona felt that she was becoming more and more important to her husband, and she did everything in her power to make this so.

The busy energetic life she was leading raised her in her own estimation. She was not given to pondering and weighing things, but whenever she recalled her life in the basement, taken up entirely with looking after her husband and their little household, she could not help comparing it with the present, and little by little the dismal memory of their existence in that hole faded out of her mind. The authorities at the barracks came to love her for her deftness and industry; everyone was kind to her and treated her as a human being, a thing she had never known before, and this spurred her on to greater effort.

Once, during the night shift, the fat doctor asked her about her former life, and Matrona willingly and frankly told her everything. Suddenly she broke off and gave a little laugh.

"What are you laughing at?" asked the doctor.

"Nothing special. But it was an awful way to live—and—can you believe it?—I never knew it. Not until this very minute."

After that review of the past, Matrona developed a curious attitude toward her hus-

band. She loved him as much as ever, loved him with the blind love of the female, but now it seemed to her that Grigory owed her something. Sometimes when she was talking to him she adopted a protective tone, for his restless tirades often moved her to pity. But there were moments when she doubted that she and her husband would ever live a quiet peaceful life, although she believed that Grigory would settle down and the misery he suffered would abate.

They had been fated to find each other, and the two of them, both young, strong, and industrious, would have gone on living a dreary half-famished existence devoted wholly to the daily struggle for bread had they not been spared this by what Grigory called "the restlessness in his heart" which would not let him reconcile himself to the daily grind.

One gloomy September morning the waggon came into the courtyard of the barracks, and Pronin lifted out of it a little paint-stained boy—livid, emaciated, scarcely drawing breath.

"Another one from the Petunnikov house on

Mokry Street," said the driver when he was asked where the patient came from.

"Senka!" exclaimed Grigory unhappily. "You poor little pup! Senka, do you know me?"

"Y-yes," said Senka with difficulty, slowly rolling up his eyes to see Orlov, who was holding the head of the stretcher and bending over him.

"Such a lively little cricket! How did this ever happen to you?" asked Grigory. He was strangely moved by the sight of this child in the throes of disease, and his conflicting emotions were reduced to one question as he stood there shaking his head dolefully:

"Why should a child have to get it?"

Senka shivered and said nothing.

They put him to bed and began taking off his rags, stained every colour of the rainbow.

"I'm cold," said Senka.

"We're going to give you a hot bath and make you well," said Grigory.

"You can't make me well," whispered Senka. "Uncle Grigory, bend down . . . your ear. . . I stole the accordion . . . it's in the woodshed . . . three days ago I touched it for the first time . . . after I had stolen it.

It's a marvel. I hid it . . . and that's when . . . I got the belly-ache. See? Because I sinned . . . it's hanging on the wall under the stairs . . . I stacked some wood in front of it. Give it back, Uncle Grigory. The accordionist had a sister . . . she asked for it . . . give it to her." He uttered a groan and went off into a fit of convulsions.

Everything possible was done to save him, but life had been unable to take a firm hold in Senka's undernourished body, and in the evening Grigory carried him to the morgue. He felt as if someone had done him a personal injury.

In the morgue Grigory tried to straighten the child's limbs, but he could not. He went away crushed, disheartened, carrying in his mind a picture of the twisted body of this little boy, once so lively.

He was robbed of strength by the realization of his helplessness in the face of death. How carefully he had tended Senka, how frenziedly the doctors had worked over him —and yet he had died. It filled him with resentment. One of these days the disease would seize Grigory, too, tie him into knots, and

that would be the end. He was frightened, gripped by loneliness. If only he could talk to some wise person about all this! More than once he had tried to get into conversation with one of the students, but none of them had time to philosophize. There was nothing to do but go and talk to his wife. And he went, sad and gloomy.

She was washing herself in a corner of the room and the samovar was boiling on the table, filling the room with its hissing and steaming.

Grigory sat down without a word and gazed at his wife's smooth shoulders. The samovar gurgled, water splashed, Matrona snorted, footsteps passed up and down in the corridor and Grigory tried to guess by the sound whose they were.

Suddenly it seemed to him that Matrona's shoulders were as cold and clammy as Senka's had been as he lay in convulsions. He shud dered.

"Senka died," he announced in a dull voice.

"Senka! May the Lord receive his soul in peace," intoned Matrona reverently, and then

she began to spit and sputter—the soap had got into her mouth.

"A pity," sighed Grigory.

"He was a little devil."

"Well, he's dead now, and it's not for you to say what he was or what he wasn't. And it's a great pity he's dead. He was a quick one. That accordion, now—er . . . h'm. A nimble little fellow. Sometimes I used to look at him and wonder if I oughtn't to take him on as a sort of 'prentice. An orphan. We'd have got used to him and he'd have been like a son to us. You're a strong healthy woman, but you don't have any children. Had one baby and that's all. Too bad. If we had some little shavers running round, life wouldn't be so empty. This way, what are we working for? To feed ourselves. And what's that for? To go on working. And the crazy wheel goes round and round. It'd be different if we had children."

He hung his head as he spoke, and his tone was sad and complaining. Matrona, who was standing in front of him, grew paler and paler as she listened.

"I'm healthy, you're healthy, and still we have no children," went on Grigory. "Why's

that? I keep thinking about it. It's this that drives me to drink."

"That's a lie," said Matrona in a loud voice. "That's a lie! Don't dare say such a foul thing to me, hear? Don't dare! You drink just for the mischief of it—because you can't control yourself. That's a lie!"

Grigory was stunned. He leaned back in his chair to get a better look at his wife and could not believe it was she. Never before had he seen her in such a rage, never before had she looked at him with such withering scorn or spoken with such force.

"Well?" drawled Grigory tauntingly, gripping the edge of his chair with both hands. "Well? What else have you to say?"

"Lots! I would never have said it if you hadn't thrown this in my teeth. I don't bear you any children? No, and I never will! I can't! I'll never have a child!" The cry was smothered in sobs.

"Don't shout," said her husband.

"And why won't I? Remember how often you beat me? The number of times you kicked me in the belly? Go ahead and count them! Remember how you slammed and pound-

ed me? Do you know how much blood I lost because of your floggings? My night-dress would be soaked to the very top! That's why I don't bear you any children, loving husband! And how dare you throw it in my teeth now? You ought to be ashamed to let me see that mug of yours. You're a murderer, that's what you are! You murdered your own children, and now you blame me for not having any! I've borne everything, I've forgiven you everything, but I won't forgive you those words as long as I live! To my dying day I'll remember them! Don't you really know it's you who's to blame, because of the beatings you gave me? Am I any different from other women that I shouldn't want children? How many nights have I laid awake praying God to save the child in my womb from your blows, you murderer! The sight of other people's children made me choke with envy, and with pity for myself. Holy Virgin, how I wanted a child! I used to fondle that Senka on the sly . . . me . . . a barren woman! Oh, merciful God!"

She gasped for breath. The words poured out of her mouth incoherently. Her face grew

splotched, she trembled all over and clutched at her breast, sobs rose in her throat. Grigory, pale and distraught, stared wide-eyed at this woman he had never seen before. And he was afraid of her—afraid she would spring at his throat and strangle him: that was the threat in those wild eyes, flaming with vengeance. She was twice as strong as he was now; he realized it, and was afraid. He could not get up and strike her as he would certainly have done had it not been for the transformation wrought in her by some mighty force.

"It's my soul you injured. Great is the sin you committed against me! But I suffered it all and said nothing—because I loved you. But I won't let you throw this in my teeth! That's more than I can bear. May you be damned in hell for the words you spoke!"

"Hold your tongue!" muttered Grigory, baring his teeth.

"Here, what's all this noise about? Have you forgotten where you are?"

There was a film over Grigory's eyes. He could not make out who was standing in the door-way, and with a fierce oath he pushed the person aside and rushed out into the

fields. Matrona remained standing in the middle of the room for a moment, and then staggered to the bed as if blind, with outstretched hands, and collapsed with a groan.

It grew dark. An inquisitive golden moon peered through tattered clouds into the room. But soon a fine rain, harbinger of the endless, dismal rains of autumn, came pattering against the walls and windows of the barracks.

The pendulum of the clock marked the passing of the seconds; drops of rain kept hammering at the window-pane. The hours went by one after another, the rain fell, and the woman lay motionless on the bed, her inflamed eyes fixed on the ceiling, her teeth clenched, her cheek-bones protruding. And still the rain pattered on walls and windows. It seemed to be muttering some wearisome monotony over and over, anxious to convince somebody of something, but, being of too sluggish a temperament to do this swiftly and beautifully, it hoped to accomplish it by reiterating a dull sermon in which there was none of the sincerity of true belief.

The rain fell even when the dawn brought a feeble brightness to the sky, portending a

gloomy day. Matrona could not go to sleep. In the monotonous patter of the rain sounded a frightening question:

"What will happen next?"

And the answer flashed forth in a vision of her drunken husband. It was hard for her to relinquish her dream of a peaceful life filled with love. She had nurtured this dream, driving out of her mind all premonitions that it was unattainable. Yet she knew very well that if Grigory should take to drinking again she could not go on living with him. She had seen him different, she herself was different, and the thought of her former life filled her with revulsion and terror—feelings she had not known before. But she was a woman, and as such she blamed herself for this rupture with her husband.

"How did it ever happen? Oh, God! As if I had broke loose!"

It grew light. A dense fog hung over the fields, concealing the sky.

"Matrona Orlova! Time to report for duty!"

She got up in obedience to the call, washed herself hastily and went into the barracks, feeling weak and ill. Her lassitude, her lack-

lustre eyes and cheerless face caused surprise in the ward.

"Aren't you well?" one of the doctors asked her.

"It's nothing."

"Don't hesitate to tell us. We can have someone else take your place."

Matrona was ashamed; she did not want her fears and sufferings to be known to this woman who, though kind, was nevertheless a stranger. Drawing on the last stores of courage in her anguished soul, she said with a little laugh:

"It's nothing. Me and my man just had a little tiff. It'll pass. It's not the first time."

"You poor thing," sighed the doctor, who knew what her life had been.

Matrona had an impulse to bury her face in this woman's bosom and give vent to her feelings. But she merely pressed her lips tightly together and put her hand to her throat to press the sobs back into her chest.

When her work was over she went back to her room and looked out of the window. The waggon was coming over the fields towards the barracks –probably bringing anoth-

er patient. A fine rain was falling. There was nothing else to be seen. Matrona turned away with a sigh and sat down at the table.

"What will happen next?" was the question that absorbed her.

For a long time she sat there in a sort of daze, but every time a step was heard out in the corridor she would start, rise in her chair, and turn to the door.

But when at last the door was opened and Grigory came in she did not start and did not get up, for it was as if the autumn clouds had descended out of the sky and were pressing her down with all their might.

Grigory stopped in the door-way, threw his wet cap on the floor and strode noisily over to his wife. Water was dripping off his clothes. His face was red, his eyes bleary, his lips stretched in a broad and foolish grin. Matrona could hear the water slopping inside his boots. He looked wretched, and she had not expected this.

"A fine sight," she said.

He nodded his head foolishly.

"Want me to fall on my knees to you?" he asked.

She did not answer.

"You don't, don't you? Just as you say. All this time I've been trying to decide whether I've done you wrong or not. Looks as if I have, and so I say: do you want me to fall down on my knees to you?"

Still she did not answer. She could smell the fumes of vodka coming from him, and bitterness filled her heart.

"Look here, none of your airs. You'd better talk while I'm still peaceable," said Grigory, raising his voice. "Are you going to forgive me or not?"

"You're drunk," said Matrona, drawing in her breath. "Go and sleep it off."

"That's a lie, I'm not drunk, I'm just—tired. I've been walking all this time and thinking. Oh, all the things I've thought of! You'd better watch out!"

He shook his finger at her and gave a twisted smile.

"Why don't you say something?" he asked.

"I can't talk to you."

"You can't? Why not?"

Suddenly he flared up and his voice grew firmer.

"You shouted at me here last night—bawled at me, and—here I am asking you to forgive me. You'd better think that over."

His voice was sinister, his lips twitched and his nostrils were dilated. Matrona knew what that meant, and her mind resurrected scenes from their former life: the basement, the fights on Saturday night, all the violence and misery of their existence.

"I have thought it over," she said crisply. "I see the beast's come out in you again."

"The beast? What's that got to do with it? I'm asking you to forgive me. Do you think I need your forgiveness? I can get on very well without it, but I've decided you're going to forgive me, see?"

"Go away, Grigory," cried the woman miserably, twisting away from him.

"Go away?" he said with an ugly laugh. "So that you can be free to do what you want? Oh, no. Where did you get that idea?"

He seized her by the shoulder, jerked her to him and flourished a knife in her face—a short thick rusty blade.

"Ekh, if you'd only kill me!" she said with a profound sigh, and, shaking him

off, turned away again. He dropped back, struck less by her words than by the tone in which they were uttered. He had heard her say this before, but never in such a way. A moment before he would have struck her easily, but now he could not and would not. He flung the knife on the table, almost frightened by her indifference.

"You she-devil! What do you want of me?" he muttered viciously.

"There's nothing I want of you," gasped Matrona. "Did you come here to kill me? Well, go ahead!"

Grigory looked at her without speaking, completely at a loss. He had come here determined to bring his wife into subjection. In their clash of the preceding evening she had proved the stronger; he was aware of this and considered it an indignity. He knew very definitely that he must—that he simply *had to* make her submit to him again. A passionate man, he had thought and suffered much in the last twenty-four hours, but the obscurity of his mind kept him from comprehending the emotional chaos produced in him by his wife's just accusation. He sensed that she was in

revolt, and so he had brought a knife to frighten her with. And he would have killed her if she had shown more spirit in resisting him. But there she stood, defenseless, broken by misery, and yet—stronger than he was. That was what stung him, and the sting had a sobering effect.

"Listen," he said, "climb down off your high horse. You know me—I really will jam this thing between your ribs, and that'll be the end. Amen. Very simple."

He knew very well that this was not what he ought to say, and so he stopped. Matrona did not move a muscle where she stood with her back to him. That same question was throbbing in her mind:

"What will happen next?"

"Matrona," said Grigory softly, leaning towards her over the table, "after all, is it my fault if—if things aren't what they should be?"

He bowed his head and drew in a deep breath.

"Life's rotten. Do you call this living? There's the cholera patients, of course, but what of it? Do they make things easier for me? Some of them die, others get well, but

me—I've got to go on living. How? This isn't life, it's just one big convulsion. Is that fair? I see how everything is, but it's hard for me to explain why I can't go on living this way any more. Look all the care and attention they get. And me? I'm well, but if my soul's sick, does that make me worth less than they are? Just think, I'm worse than the cholera patients. I've got convulsions of the soul. And you shout at me. Call me a brute. A drunk. Ekh, woman's logic!"

He spoke quietly and reasonably, but she scarcely heard him because she was sternly going over the past in her mind.

"So you have nothing to say," said Grigory, feeling some strong new emotion welling up inside of him. "Why don't you say something? What is it you want of me?"

"There's nothing I want of you," exclaimed Matrona. "Can't you leave me alone? What do *you* want?"

"What do I want? I want—I want—"

But here Grigory realized he could not say what he wanted—could not say it in a way that would make it instantly clear to him and to her. He knew that a gulf had opened

between them, that no words could span it.

And this threw him into a wild frenzy. He swung his arm and brought his fist down on the back of his wife's head, roaring like a maniac.

"What are you up to, you bitch? What's your game? I'll kill you!"

The blow knocked her head against the table, but she jumped to her feet and shot her husband a glance full of hate.

"Hit me again," she said in a loud steady voice.

"Shut your mouth!"

"Hit me again. Come on."

"O-o-o-o, you she-devil!"

"This is the end, Grigory. I've had enough."

"Shut your mouth!"

"I won't let you have your way with me any more."

He ground his teeth and took a step backwards, perhaps to take another swing at her.

But at that moment the door opened and in stepped Dr. Vaschenko.

"What do you call this? Where do you think you are? What are you up to?"

He looked severe, and at the same time shocked. Grigory was not disconcerted in the least; he even made a little bow to him.

"Nothing special. Just a little fumigation between man and wife"—and he laughed hysterically in the doctor's face.

"Why didn't you report for work?" snapped the doctor, irritated by his levity.

Grigory shrugged his shoulders.

"I couldn't. Had some business of my own to attend to," he announced.

"And who made a row here last night?"

"We—"

"You? Splendid. You behave as if you were at home—go off without permission, and—"

"We're not your slaves just because—"

"Silence! You've turned this room into a pub, you beast! I'll show you where you are!"

An upsurge of mad defiance, a wild longing to throw everything up and escape from the tangle in which his soul was caught swept over Grigory. He felt that the moment had come when he would do something exceptional, and that this would instantly loose

the fetters binding his groping soul. A shudder passed over him and he had a cold sensation in the pit of his stomach as he turned to the doctor and said, grinning like a Cheshire cat:

"Don't shout, you'll burst a blood-vessel. I know damn well where I am—in the slaughter-house!"

"Wha-at? What did you say?" asked the dumbstruck doctor, swaying towards him.

Grigory knew he had said something outrageous, but this aggravated instead of calming his passion.

"That's all right, you'll get over it. Matrona, gather your belongings together."

"Oh, no you don't, my fine fellow! Be so good as to answer my question," said the doctor with ominous tranquillity. "For that, I'll—"

"Don't shout, and don't make a scene," interrupted Grigory, staring him brazenly in the face. As he talked he felt as if he were advancing in jumps, and with every jump his breath came easier. "You seem to think the cholera gives you a right to order me about. Nothing of the sort. As for this medicine of yours—nobody needs it. Maybe I went too

far about the slaughter-house, but stop your shouting just the same."

"What's this!" said the doctor quietly. "I'll teach you a lesson. Hey! This way!"

People were already crowding into the corridor. Grigory narrowed his eyes and set his teeth.

"I'm not lying and I'm not afraid. And if you think you're going to teach me a lesson, I'll tell you a few more things."

"You will? Go ahead."

"I'll go into town and give them an earful: 'Hey, fellows', I'll say, 'd'ye know how they treat the cholera there?'"

"What's that?" gasped the doctor.

"And then we'll give you a fumigation here —with fireworks and 'luminations."

"Damn it all, what nonsense are you talking?" The doctor's astonishment had given way to exasperation with this fellow whom he had known as a diligent and sensible worker, but who now, for some incredible reason, was sticking his head in a noose.

"What are you saying, you fool?"

Fool. The word re-echoed in all the recesses of Grigory's being; he knew the judgement

to be a fair one, but this only heightened his sense of injury.

"What am I saying? I know what. And it's all the same to me," he said, his eyes flashing. "Everything's always the same for people like me, I can see that now. And there's no reason why we should hide our feelings. Come along, Matrona, get your belongings together.

"I'm not going anywhere," said Matrona firmly.

The doctor stared at them round-eyed and rubbed his forehead, completely nonplussed.

"You're either drunk or insane. Do you realize what you're doing?"

Grigory did not retreat; he could not.

"What do *you* realize?" he jeered. "What are *you* doing? Fumigation, ha, ha! Cure the sick and let the healthy die from the rummy lives they live. Matrona, I'll smash your face if you don't come along this minute."

"I'm not going with you."

She was pale and unnaturally calm, and there was cold determination in her eyes. And in spite of his heroic swagger, Grigory turned away and hung his head in silence.

"Damn!" said the doctor. "The devil himself couldn't make head or tail of this. Get out of here, you! Get out, and be thankful I let you off easy. I ought to have you arrested, you blockhead! Get out!"

Grigory glanced up at the doctor and hung his head again. He would have felt better if they had given him a beating or packed him off to the police-station.

"I'm asking you for the last time—are you coming?" Grigory said to his wife hoarsely.

"No, I'm not," she replied, shrinking as if in expectation of a blow.

Grigory waved an arm.

"Then you can all be damned. What the hell do I need you for?"

"Come, you idiot," began the doctor in a tone meant to bring him to his senses.

"Shut up?" shouted Grigory. "Well, you damned hussy, I'm going. Maybe we'll never see each other again, and maybe we will—just as I see fit. But if we do, you can be sure it'll go hard with you!"

And he made for the door.

"Farewell, tragedian," said the doctor sarcastically as Grigory passed him.

Grigory halted and raised eyes smouldering with misery.

"Leave me alone," he said quietly. "Don't wind me up all over again. The spring went off without hurting anybody this time. Let it go at that."

He picked up his cap off the floor, stuck it on his head, hunched his shoulders, and went out without so much as a glance at his wife.

The doctor watched her anxiously. Her face was very white.

"What's the matter with him?" the doctor said, nodding towards Grigory.

"I don't know."

"Where will he go now?"

"To get drunk," said Matrona unhesitatingly.

The doctor lifted his eyebrows and went out.

Matrona looked out of the window. A man's form was hurrying through the dusk, through the rain and the wind, striding down the road leading into town. Alone, in the midst of those wet grey fields. . . .

Matrona's face grew even whiter. She walked over to the icon corner and fell on her knees before the holy images, bowing to the floor

again and again, gasping out the words of a prayer in an impassioned stream, rubbing her throat and her breast with trembling fingers.

One day I visited a trade school in the town of X. My guide was a man of my acquaintance who had helped to found the school. As he led me through model classrooms, he said:

"As you see, we have something to be proud of. Our young people are getting on famously. And you'd be surprised what a fine group of teachers we've enlisted. In the shoemaking shop, for instance, the teacher is a simple cobbler—a woman—a tempting little piece, but of impeccable behaviour. But what am I telling you this for? As I was saying—a simple cobbler, but how she works! And what a gifted teacher she is, and how she loves her pupils! Quite extraordinary. You never saw such a busy little bee, and all for 12 rubles a month and a room in the school. She even supports two orphans on that sum. An exceptionally interesting personality."

My friend was so lavish in his praise of this cobbler that I became anxious to meet her.

This was easily arranged, and one day Matrona Orlova told me the sad story of her life. For some time after she left her husband he gave her no peace; he came to see her in a drunken state, made scenes, waited for her whenever she went out, and beat her mercilessly. She endured it all.

When the barracks were closed, one of the doctors offered to help to place her in this school and to see that she was protected from her husband. This was done, and Matrona entered upon a life of peaceful labour. A nurse of her acquaintance taught her to read and write; she adopted two orphans from an asylum—a boy and a girl—and threw herself into her work, contented with her lot, but recalling her past with fear and sorrow. Nothing was too much for her to do for her pupils, she took a broad view of the importance of her work, was very conscientious and won the respect of those in charge of the school. But she had a nasty dry cough, a malignant flush burned in the hollows of her cheeks, and sadness hovered in her grey eyes.

I made the acquaintance of Grigory, too. I found him in the slums of the town and be-

came his friend after two or three encounters. He repeated the story his wife had told me, and added, after brief reflection:

"So that's how it was, Maxim Savvateyevich--I got lifted up for a space and then slapped down again. And so I never did the big thing I dreamed of doing. But I've still got this hankering to do something big—to grind the earth into powder or lead a band of thieves, or do anything else to set me up above others, so that I can look down on them and spit on them. And I'd say to them: 'Ekh, you vermin! What are you living for? What sort of lives do you live? You're nothing but a lot of two-faced swindlers, that's what you are!' And then I'd come hurtling down from the heights, head over heels, and—bang! That'd be the end. Ekh, how dull and stuffy life is! When I got Matrona off my neck I says to myself: 'Clear sailing ahead now, Grigory! The anchor's up!' But it didn't turn out that way. Shallow water. I ran on to a reef and I've been high and dry ever since. But I don't mean to go to pot. Not I. I'll show people what I can do yet. How? No one but the devil knows that. . . . My wife? To hell with

her! What does a fellow like me want with a wife? Or she with me, a man who feels a pull in all four directions at once? I was born with this unrest in my heart. It's my fate to be a tramp. I've walked and I've rode to all sorts of places. No comfort anywhere. . . . Drink? Of course I drink. Vodka's good for putting out fires, and it's a big fire that's raging inside me! I'm sick of everything—towns and villages and people of all sizes and makes. Hell, couldn't anything better than this have been thought of? Every man pitted against his neighbour. I'd like nothing better than to squeeze the lights out of all of them. Ekh, life! An invention of the devil."

The heavy door of the pub in which Grigory and I were sitting kept swinging open, squeaking each time. And the inside of the pub was like a great jaw that was slowly but surely devouring impecunious Russians, one after another . . . those who were restless . . . and those who were not.

1897

FOR WANT OF SOMETHING BETTER TO DO

THE PASSENGER train, like an enormous serpent belching forth clouds of dense grey smoke, was swallowed up in the boundless steppe, in a yellow sea of corn. As the smoke dissolved in the torrid air, so did the irate burst of noise that for a few moments violated the impassive silence of that vast and empty plain, in the middle of which stood a tiny railway station whose loneliness evoked the most mournful sentiments.

And when the noise of the train which, if raucous, was at least alive, had died away in the clear vault of the sky, the same oppressive silence enveloped the station.

The steppe was golden yellow, the sky sapphire blue. And both of them were illimit-

able. In the centre of such vastness, the little brown buildings of the station gave the impression of being chance brush-strokes spoiling the melancholy picture executed painstakingly by an artist with no imagination.

Every day at twelve o'clock at noon and at four o'clock in the afternoon trains came out of the steppe and stood at the station for exactly two minutes. These four minutes represented the main, and indeed the only diversion at the station, for they alone brought new impressions to the people employed there.

In every train were all kinds of people in all kinds of clothes. They were to be seen but for an instant: a fleeting picture of tired, impatient, indifferent faces at carriage windows—and then a bell, a whistle, and they were noisily whisked away into the steppe, into the distance, into the town, where life seethed and bustled.

The station employees gazed at these faces with curiosity, and when the train was gone they told each other their impressions. All around them stretched the silent steppe,

above them arched the impassive sky, and in their hearts brooded envy of these people who sped to unknown destinations every day, leaving them imprisoned in the wilderness, beyond the pale of life, so to speak.

Here they are standing on the platform, watching the black ribbon of a departing train disappear in the golden sea of corn. And so absorbed are they in their impressions of this momentary glimpse of life, that they are silent.

Nearly everyone is here: the stationmaster, a stout, genial, fair-haired man with the untrimmed whiskers of a Cossack; his assistant, a red-headed young fellow with a goatee; Luka, the station guard, small and quick and cunning; and one of the switchmen named Gomozov, a quiet, stocky fellow with a thick beard.

The wife of the stationmaster is sitting on a bench beside the station door. She is small and fat and suffers greatly from the heat. A baby is sleeping in her lap, and the baby's face is as round and red as its mother's.

The train goes down an incline and disappears as if swallowed up by the earth.

The stationmaster turns to his wife.

"Is the samovar ready, Sonya?"

"Of course," she replies in a soft and languid voice.

"Luka! Put things in shape here—sweep the platform and the rails. Look at all the rubbish they've left behind."

"I know, Matvei Yegorovich."

"Well, shall we have tea, Nikolai Petrovich?"

"As usual," replies his assistant.

If it happens to have been the noon train that has passed, Matvei Yegorovich says to his wife:

"Is dinner ready, Sonya?"

Then he gives Luka instructions which are always the same, and says to his assistant, who boards with them:

"Well, shall we have dinner?"

"As usual," his assistant replies, sensibly enough.

And they leave the platform and go into a room that has a great many plants and very little furniture in it, a room that smells of cooking and diapers and where the table talk is always about what has passed them by.

"Did you notice that brunette in the yellow dress in the second-class carriage, Nikolai Petrovich? A tempting morsel, if you ask me!"

"Not bad, but no taste in clothes," says his assistant.

His remarks are always brief and spoken with assurance, for he prides himself on being a man of education and experience. He finished the gymnasium. He has a note-book with a black binding in which he writes down sayings by eminent men which he finds in the books and newspapers that happen to fall into his hands. The stationmaster accepts his authority in all matters outside their work, and listens attentively to whatever he has to say. He is especially impressed by the gems of wisdom to be found in Nikolai Petrovich's note-book and goes into ecstasies over them in a simple-hearted way. His assistant's observation on the brunette's taste in clothes raises doubts in his own mind.

"Why?" he asks. "Shouldn't brunettes wear yellow?"

"I wasn't thinking of the colour, but of the cut," explains Nikolai Petrovich as he neat-

ly transfers some jam from the glass dish to his own plate.

"Cut? That's another thing," agrees the stationmaster.

His wife joins in the conversation, for this is a subject close to her heart and accessible to her mind. But since the intellects of these people have been subjected to little refinement, their talk drags on feebly and rarely touches their emotions.

Through the windows can be seen the steppe, which is under a spell of silence; and the sky, magnificent in its detached serenity.

Scarcely an hour passes but a goods train goes by. The crews of all these trains are old acquaintances. The guards are somnolent creatures who have had the spirit taken out of them by endless trips through the steppe. To be sure, they sometimes recount stories of accidents on the way: at a certain place a man was killed. Or they gossip about their work: so-and-so was fined, somebody else was transferred. These titbits are not discussed; they are gobbled up as a glutton gobbles up a rare and tasty dish.

Slowly the sun sinks to the rim of the steppe,

turning crimson as it draws near the earth. A reddish glow is cast over everything, and this gives rise to a vague longing—the lure of the spaces beyond the wilderness. At last the sun touches the horizon and drops listlessly into or behind it. For a long time after that the bright tones of the sunset play soft music in the sky, but it grows fainter and fainter as a warm and soundless dusk sets in. Stars come out, all a-tremble, as if frightened by the dreariness of the scene.

The steppe seems to shrink in the dusk; silently the shadows of night close in on the station from all sides. And then comes night itself, dark and gloomy.

Lights are lit at the station. Higher and brighter than all others is the green signal light, encompassed by darkness and silence.

From time to time a bell clangs, giving notice of an approaching train; the urgent sound is borne out into the steppe, where it is swallowed up.

Shortly after the clanging of the bell a red light comes flashing out of the dark waste, and the silence of the steppe is

shattered by the roar of a train making its way towards the lonely station wrapped in darkness.

The lives of the lower classes of the little society at the station were different from those of the aristocracy. Luka, the station guard, waged a constant struggle with his desire to run off to his wife and brother who lived in a village seven versts from the station. He had a "household" there, as he usually put it to Gomozov when asking this staid and taciturn switchman to "do duty" for him.

The word "household" invariably drew a sigh from Gomozov.

"Very well, go ahead," he would say. "A household has got to be looked after, no doubt about that."

But the other switchman—Afanasi Yagodka, an old soldier with a round red face covered with grey stubble—was of a mocking disposition, and he did not believe Luka.

"A household!" he would scoff derisively. "A wife, that makes more sense. And that wife

of yours—is she a widow? Or is her husband a soldier?"

"You Birdie-Brigadier!" Luka would snort contemptuously.

He called Yagodka the Birdie-Brigadier because the old soldier had a passion for birds. His little house was hung inside and out with cages and perches; and all day long, inside the house and all around it, could be heard the clamour of the birds. The quails which the soldier had taken captive kept up a monotonous and uninterrupted "cheep-chirreep!", the starlings muttered long speeches, little birds of all colours peeped, chirped and sang tirelessly, filling the soldier's lonely life with delight. He devoted all his leisure to them, and while being solicitous of and devoted to the birds, took not the slightest interest in his fellows at the station. He called Luka a snake and Gomozov a *katsap*, and accused them to their faces of trailing the women, for which, in his opinion, they deserved a good thrashing.

Generally Luka paid little attention to what he said, but if the soldier went too far, Luka would tear into him at length and with vengeance:

"You garrison rat, you half-chewed turnip! What're you good for, you drummer-boy to the colonel's goat? All you've ever done is feed frogs to the guns and stand guard over the company's cabbages. Who are you to be calling other people names? Go back to your quails, you Birdie-Brigadier!"

After calmly listening to such a tirade. Yagodka would go and complain to the station-master, who would shout that he had more important matters to attend to and turn him out. At which Yagodka would find Luka and undertake to give Luka a tongue-lashing himself—calmly, without losing his temper, employing a vocabulary so weightily obscene that Luka would run away with his fingers in his ears.

If the soldier jeered Gomozov because of his frivolity, the latter would sigh and make uneasy efforts to defend himself.

"What's to be done? Looks as if it just can't be helped. It's the mischief, all right, but, as they say, judge not lest ye be judged yourselves."

One day the soldier replied to this by saying with a little laugh:

"The same old recipe for all ills! 'Judge not,' 'judge not.' Why, if people didn't judge their fellows they wouldn't have anything to talk about!"

There was one other woman at the station besides the stationmaster's wife. This was Arina, the cook. She was almost forty years old and exceedingly ugly—dumpy in figure, with long pendulous breasts, and always dirty and unkempt. She waddled when she walked and there was an intimidated look in the slits of eyes that glinted in her pock-marked face. There was something cowed and slave-like in her ungainly form. Her thick lips were permanently pursed, as if she wanted to ask forgiveness of everyone—as if she wanted to fall on her knees before people, and was afraid of crying. For eight months Gomozov lived at the station without paying any particular attention to her. He would say "Hullo" in passing, she would return the salutation, they might exchange a few perfunctory words, then each would continue on his way. But one day Gomozov came into the stationmaster's kitchen and asked Arina to make

him some shirts. She agreed to, and when they were ready, she took them to him herself.

"Thanks," said Gomozov. "Three shirts at ten kopeks a piece—that'll be thirty kopeks I owe you, won't it?"

"I guess so," said Arina.

Gomozov fell to thinking.

"What gubernia are you from?" he said at last to this woman, whose eyes had been fixed on his beard all this time.

"Ryazanskaya," she said.

"Pretty far away. How did you ever come here?"

"I don't know. I'm all alone. Haven't got nobody."

"That's enough to make a person go even farther," sighed Gomozov.

And both of them were silent again.

"Take me. I'm from Nizhny Novgorod. Sergach Uyezd," said Gomozov after a while. "I'm alone, too. Nobody at all. But once upon a time I had a house and a wife and children. Two of them. My wife died of the cholera, the kids of one thing or another. And me—I wore myself out with grieving. Later on I tried to start all over again but it was no

good. The works was run down and there was no winding them up again. So off I went —as far away as I could. I've been living like this for more than two years."

"It's bad when you've not got a place to call your own," said Arina softly.

"Very bad. Are you a widow?"

"No, I'm a maid."

"Go along with you!" said Gomozov, taking no pains to disguise his incredulity.

"Honest to goodness," insisted Arina.

"Why didn't you ever get married?"

"Who'd have me? I haven't got nothing. A man'd want something. And then my face is so ugly."

"True," drawled Gomozov, scrutinizing her curiously as he stroked his beard. He asked her what her pay was.

"Two and a half."

"I see. So I owe you thirty kopeks, eh? Look, come and get it tonight. About ten o'clock, will you? I'll pay you and we'll have a glass of tea together for want of something better to do. We're lonely souls, both of us. Do come."

"I will," she said simply, and went out.

She came back at exactly ten o'clock and went away at dawn.

Gomozov did not invite her to come again and did not give her her thirty kopeks. She came back of her own accord. She came back, bovine and submissive, and stood silently in front of him. And he stared up at her from where he was lying on the couch.

"Sit down," he said after a while, moving over.

When she was seated, he said, "Listen, keep this dark. Don't let a soul get wind of it, hear? I'll get into trouble if you do. I'm not young any more, and neither are you, understand?"

She nodded.

As he was seeing her out he handed her some clothes to mend for him.

"Don't let a soul get wind of it," he admonished her again.

And so, carefully hiding their relationship from others, they went on living together.

At night Arina would steal to his room almost on all fours. He received her indulgently, with the air of a lord and master.

"What a mug you've got!" he would say at times.

She would only smile back feebly and apologetically, and on leaving would take some bundle of work to do for him.

They did not see each other often. But sometimes when they met on the station grounds, he would whisper:

"Drop in tonight."

And she would come obediently and with a look of such gravity on her pock-marked face that one would have thought she was fulfilling a duty whose solemn importance she fully appreciated.

But on going home the old look of guilt and apprehension would come back.

Occasionally she would linger in some secluded corner or behind some door to gaze out into the steppe. Night reigned out there, and its grim silence filled her heart with terror.

One day, after seeing off the afternoon train, the station officials sat down to tea in the shade of some poplars growing outside the windows of the stationmaster's rooms.

They often had tea there on hot days—it introduced a certain variety into the monotony of their lives.

On this particular day they were drinking

in silence, having said all there was to say about the last train.

"Today's hotter than yesterday," said the stationmaster, holding out his empty glass to his wife with one hand and wiping the sweat off his forehead with the other.

"It just seems hotter because you're bored to death," said his wife as she took the glass.

"H'm, maybe you're right. Cards would help. But there's only three of us."

His assistant shrugged his shoulders and screwed up his eyes.

"Card games, according to Schopenhauer, show the bankruptcy of the mind," he pronounced impressively.

"Very clever," gurgled the stationmaster. "What was that? The bankruptcy of the mind—h'm. Who was it said it?"

"Schopenhauer. A German philosopher."

"A philosopher? H'm."

"Those philosophers—what do they do? Work at universities?" inquired Sonya.

"How shall I explain it? Being a philosopher is not a situation, but a natural endowment, so to speak. Anyone can be a philosopher—anyone who is born with a tenden-

cy to think and to seek cause and effect in all things. To be sure, philosophers are sometimes to be found in universities, but they may be anywhere—even in the employment of the railway."

"And do they make a lot of money—those who are at the universities?"

"It all depends on their capabilities."

"If only we had a fourth partner, we'd put in a nice couple of hours," sighed the stationmaster.

And the talk broke off again.

High in the blue sky sang the larks, from branch to branch of the poplars hopped the robins, whistling softly. From inside the house came the crying of a baby.

"Is Arina in there?" asked the stationmaster.

"Of course," replied his wife.

"There's something highly original about that woman, have you noticed it, Nikolai Petrovich?"

"'Originality is the mother of banality,'" mused Nikolai Petrovich, looking very sage and ponderous.

"What's that?" perked up the stationmaster.

When the saying had been repeated in edifying accents, the stationmaster half-closed his eyes deliciously, while his wife remarked in languorous tones:

"It's simply wonderful the way you remember what you read! As for me, I read something one day and forget it the next. Why, just the other day I read something frightfully interesting and amusing in the *Niva* but for the life of me I can't remember what it was."

"All a matter of habit," explained Nikolai Petrovich tersely.

"That's even better than that—what's his name? Schopenhauer," said the stationmaster with a smile. "In other words, everything new grows old."

"Or just the reverse, for, as one of the poets has said: 'Life in her wisdom is frugal, for she always makes the new out of the old.'"

"Damn it all, where do you get them from? They come pouring out of you like out of a sieve!"

The stationmaster gave a delighted chuckle, his wife smiled sweetly, and Nikolai Petrovich made a vain effort to hide his satisfaction.

"Who was it said that about banality?"

"Baryatinsky, a poet."

"And that other?"

"Also a poet. Fofanov."

"Smart fellows," said the stationmaster in approbation of the poets, and he repeated the quotation in a sing-song voice, a rapt smile on his face.

The boredom of their lives played a sort of game with them; it would release them from its clutches for a moment, only to seize them the tighter. Then they would grow silent again and sit there puffing with the heat, which their tea-drinking only intensified.

There was nothing but sun in the steppe.

"As I was saying about Arina," resumed the stationmaster. "She's a queer creature. I can't help wondering at her. It's as if she'd been struck down by something—never laughs, never sings, hardly ever speaks. Like a stump in the ground. But she's a first-class worker. And the way she looks after Lelia—nothing's too much to do for the baby."

He spoke in lowered tones for fear Arina might overhear him. He was well aware that one must never pay servants compliments—

it spoils them. Sonya interrupted him and gave a frown full of hidden meaning:

"Enough of such talk. There's lots of things you don't know about her," she said.

Nikolai Petrovich began to sing softly, beating time with his spoon on the table:

A slave to love,
I lack the strength
To flight with thee,
My blessed demon.

"What? What's that?" put in the station-master. "Her? You must be fooling, both of you!"

And he burst into loud laughter. His jowls shook and drops of sweat dripped off his brow.

"It's not funny in the least," said Sonya. "For one thing, she's in charge of the baby, and for another—just look at this bread! Burnt and sour. And why?"

"There's no doubt about it, the bread's not what it should be. You'll have to scold her for it. But good God, I never expected this. Why, damn it all, she's nothing but dough herself! And he! Who is *he*? Luka? Won't

I tease him, the rascal! Or Yagodka—Old Shave-Lip?"

"Gomozov," said Nikolai Petrovich tersely.

"Him? That quiet fellow? Come, you must be making it up!"

The stationmaster was highly amused by the situation. One minute he would laugh till he cried, the next he would observe seriously that the lovers would have to be given a severe reprimand, and then, as he imagined the tender words exchanged between them, he would go off into peals of laughter again.

In the end he began to probe for details. At that Nikolai Petrovich pulled a stern face and Sonya cut him short.

"The baboons! Just wait, I'll have some fun with them yet! Very amusing," said the irrepressible stationmaster.

At that moment Luka put in an appearance.

"Telegraph's clicking," he announced.

"I'm coming. Signal Number 42."

Presently he and his assistant were making their way to the station where Luka was ringing the bell to signal the train. Nikolai Petrovich telegraphed to the next station

for permission to despatch train No. 42 while the stationmaster paced the floor of the office, smiling to himself and saying:

"You and me'll play a trick on them, shall we? For want of something better to do. At least we'll have a laugh."

"That's permissible," said Nikolai Petrovich as he operated the telegraph key.

Philosophers, as he knew, should be laconic.

Very soon after that an opportunity for them to have their laugh presented itself.

One night Gomozov visited Arina in the shed where, at his demand and with the consent of her mistress, Arina had made a bed for herself among all kinds of lumber. It was cold and damp there, and the broken chairs, discarded tubs, boards, and other rubbish took on fearsome forms in the dark. When Arina was alone she was so terrified she could not sleep and would lie in the straw with wide-open eyes, mumbling prayers to herself.

Gomozov came, mauled her for a long time without saying a word, grew tired, fell asleep. But Arina woke him up almost immediately.

"Timofei Petrovich! Timofei Petrovich!" she whispered in alarm.

"What?" replied Gomozov, only half-awake.

"They've locked us in."

"What's that?" he asked as he jumped up.

"They came to the door and padlocked it."

"You're crazy!" he whispered in fright and anger, thrusting her away.

"See for yourself," she said humbly.

He got up, went stumbling past the lumber to the door and gave it a push.

"It's all that soldier's doings," he said gloomily after a pause.

A burst of laughter came from the other side of the door.

"Let me out!" called Gomozov.

"What's that?" came the soldier's voice. "Let me out, I say."

"In the morning," said the soldier, turning away.

"I've got to go on duty, damn it all!" pleaded Gomozov wrathfully.

"I'll do duty for you. Stay right where you are."

And the soldier went away.

"You dirty dog!" muttered the switchman

miserably. "Listen, you can't lock me in like this. There's the stationmaster. What'll you tell him? He'll be sure to ask where Gomozov is, and then what'll you say?"

"I'm afraid it's the stationmaster told him to do it," murmured Arina dismally.

"The stationmaster?" repeated Gomozov in fright. "Why should he do such a thing?" He grew thoughtful a moment, then shouted at her, "You're lying!"

A profound sigh was her only answer.

"God, what'll happen now?" said the switchman, seating himself on a tub by the door. "I'm disgraced. And it's all your fault, you pig-faced monster!"

And he shook his fist in the direction from which came the sound of her breathing. She said nothing.

They were enveloped in grey shadows—shadows impregnated by the smell of mould and sour cabbage and some other acrid smell that tickled the nostrils. Thin ribbons of moonlight slipped through cracks in the door. From outside came the rumble of a goods train withdrawing from the station.

"Why don't you say something, you scarecrow?" said Gomozov, angry and contemptuous. "What am I to do now? You got me into this fix, and now you have nothing to say? Think of a way out, damn you! How am I going to live down this disgrace? God! What ever made me take up with such a creature!"

"I'll ask them to forgive me," said Arina softly.

"Well?"

"Maybe they will."

"What's that to me? All right, they'll forgive you; what of it? Am I disgraced or not? They'll have the laugh on me just the same."

In a few minutes he began to curse and rail at her again. Time dragged on insufferably. At last the woman said to him in a trembling voice:

"Forgive me, Timofei Petrovich."

"Forgive you with an axe, that's what I'd like to do," he snarled.

And again there was silence, heavy and oppressive, full of aching misery for the two people imprisoned in the darkness.

"Lordy, if only it would get light!" moaned Arina.

"Hold your tongue! I'll show you a light!" threatened Gomozov, and hurled another string of abuse at her. Then again the torture of silence. Time seemed to drag even more cruelly with the coming of dawn, as if each minute loitered on purpose, finding entertainment in the comic situation of these two people.

After a while Gomozov fell asleep and was wakened up by the crowing of a rooster outside the shed.

"Hey, pig-face, are you asleep?" he whispered.

"No," replied Arina with a sigh.

"Why not?" he asked ironically. "Ugh!"

"Timofei Petrovich!" wailed Arina. "Don't be angry with me. Take pity on me. In the name of Christ, take pity on me. I'm all alone, without a soul in the world. You—you're the only one I have. After all, we—"

"Stop howling! Don't make me laugh," interrupted Gomozov harshly, suppressing the woman's hysterical whispers. "Hold your tongue, once you've brought the wrath of the Lord down on your head."

And so, without speaking, they went on waiting for the passage of each successive min-

ute. But the passage of the minutes brought them nothing. At last rays of sunlight came through the cracks in the door, stitching through the darkness in shining threads. Steps were heard outside. Someone came up to the door, stood there a moment, and went away.

"Fiends!" roared Gomozov, spitting viciously. Once more they waited in strained silence.

"Dear Lord, have mercy . . ." murmured Arina.

Stealthy steps seemed to be heard. Suddenly the lock clicked and the stern voice of the stationmaster was heard.

"Gomozov!" he cried, "take Arina's arm and lead her out! Lively, now!"

"Come here, you," muttered Gomozov. Arina went over and stood beside him with hanging head.

The door was pened, and there stood the stationmaster.

"Congratulations on your newly-wedded state," he said, bowing to Arina. "Come, strike up the band!"

Gomozov stepped outside and was stopped by a deafening burst of noise. Luka, Yagod-

ka and Nikolai Petrovich were standing at the door. Luka was beating on the bottom of a pail with his fist and shouting at the top of his lungs in a strident tenor; the soldier was blowing a tin horn; Nikolai Petrovich, his cheeks distended, was waving one hand and blowing through his lips as if on a trumpet:

"Pom! Pom! Pom-pom-pom!"

The pail made a crashing sound, the horn shrieked and wailed. The stationmaster bent in two with laughter. His assistant, too, burst out laughing at the sight of the dumbfounded Gomozov whose face was ashen and whose trembling lips were twisted into an embarrassed smile. Behind him stood Arina, her head on her chest, as motionless as if turned to stone.

Luka made dreadful faces at Gomozov as he sang:

Arina whispered in his ear
What any lover loves to hear.

The soldier went over to Gomozov and tooted his horn in his very ear.

"Come along. Come on, take her arm!" cried the stationmaster, choking with laughter.

"Oh, oh! Stop it! I'll die!" shrieked Sonya

who was sitting on the porch rocking with laughter.

"'For a moment's bliss I shall suffer all,'" sang Nikolai Petrovich.

"Hurrah for the newly-weds!" called out the stationmaster as Gomozov took a step forward. And all four of them shouted "Hurrah!" the soldier in a roaring bass.

Arina followed at the heels of Gomozov. Now her head was raised, her mouth hung open and her arms dangled limply at her sides. Her dull eyes stared in front of her, but it is doubtful that they saw anything.

"Make them kiss each other, husband! Ha, ha, ha!"

"A kiss, newly-weds!" shouted Nikolai Petrovich, at which the stationmaster's legs refused to support him and he sank weakly against the trunk of a tree. The pail kept clanging, the horn tooted and hooted, and Luka did a little dance as he sang:

The cabbage soup Arina made
Is much too thick, I am afraid!

Nikolai Petrovich blew out his cheeks again:

"Pom-pom-pom! Toot-toot-toot! Pom-pom! Toot-toot!"

When Gomozov reached the door of the barracks he disappeared. Arina was left standing in the courtyard surrounded by a group of wild people who shouted, laughed, whistled in her ear, and leaped about her in an orgy of merriment. There she stood in their midst with immobile face—dirty, unkempt, pitiable, absurd.

"The bridegroom's gone off and left her behind," called the stationmaster to his wife, pointing his finger at Arina and doubling up with laughter.

Arina turned her head to him and then walked past the barracks, out into the steppe. Her departure was attended by shouts, laughter, hooting.

"Enough! Leave her alone!" called out Sonya. "Give her a chance to come to. The dinner's got to be cooked, don't forget."

Arina went out into the steppe; out beyond the demarcation line to a field of shaggy corn. She walked slowly, like one lost in thought.

"What's that? What's that?" asked the stationmaster of the participants in this

little joke, who were now reminding each other of choice details of the newly-weds' behaviour. They were all roaring with laughter. And even here Nikolai Petrovich found occasion to insert one of his gems of wisdom:

It is no crime to laugh
At what is laughable.

This he said to Sonya, adding as a caution, "But it is harmful to laugh too much."

There was a great deal of laughter at the station that day, but a very bad dinner, for Arina did not come back to cook it and this task devolved upon the stationmaster's wife. But even a bad dinner could not cast a damp over people's spirits. Gomozov did not come out of the barracks until it was time for him to go on duty. When he did come out he was summoned to the stationmaster's office where Nikolai Petrovich, to the vast amusement of Matvei Yegorovich and Luka, cross-examined him as to how he had "conquered" his beauty.

"The most extraordinary tale of man's temptation and fall I've ever heard," said Nikolai Petrovich to the stationmaster.

"And a very bad fall it was," said the staid Gomozov with a wry smile. He realized that if he could give an account making Arina look ridiculous, he himself would be spared much of the laughter.

"At first she just kept winking at me," he said.

"Winking? Ho, ho, ho! Fancy that, Nikolai Petrovich; her winking! Simply smashing!"

"Just kept winking, that is, and I says to myself, 'It's mischief you're up to, my girl!' After that she says to me, 'If you want me to, I'll make you some shirts.'"

"'But the important thing was not the needle,'" observed Nikolai Petrovich, adding to the stationmaster by way of explanation, "That, you know, is from one of Nekrasov's poems. Go on, Gomozov."

And Gomozov went on, at first with an effort, but little by little gaining inspiration from his lies, for he saw that they were serving him well.

Meanwhile she of whom he spoke was lying in the steppe. She had walked far out into the sea of corn, where she had sunk heavily down on to the ground and lay with-

out moving. When she could no longer stand the heat of the sun on her back, she turned over and covered her face with her hands to cut off the sight of a sky that was too clear, a sun that was too bright.

Soft was the rustle of the corn about this woman, bowed down by shame; ceaseless and solicitous the chirping of innumerable grasshoppers. It was hot. She tried to pray, but could not remember the words of a prayer. Mocking faces danced before her eyes. Her ears were full of the sounds of laughter, the tooting of the horn, Luka's shrill voice. This, or the heat, constricted her chest, and she unfastened her blouse and exposed her body to the sun, hoping it would be easier to breathe. The sun scorched her skin; something hot seemed to be boring inside her breast; her breath came in gasps.

"Lord, have mercy . . ." she murmured from time to time.

But the only reply was the rustle of the corn and the chirping of the grasshoppers. Lifting her head above the waves of corn, she saw their golden shimmer, saw the black water-tower thrusting into the air beyond

he station, saw the roofs of the station buildings. There was nothing else on the boundless yellow plain covered by the blue vault of the sky, and it seemed to Arina that she was alone in all the world, and that she was lying in the very centre of it, and that no one would ever come to relieve the burden of her loneliness . . . no one . . . ever. . . .

Towards evening she heard cries.

"Arina! Arina, you cow!"

One of the voices belonged to Luka, the other to the soldier. She had hoped to hear a third voice, but he did not call her, and because of this she shed copious tears that ran swiftly down her pock-marked cheeks on to her breast. And as she cried she rubbed her bare breast against the dry warm earth to stop the burning sensation that had become more and more tormenting. She cried, and then she stopped crying, suppressing her sobs as if afraid someone would hear her and forbid her to cry.

When night came she got up and slowly made her way back to the station.

When she reached the buildings she stood leaning against the wall of the shed for a

long time gazing out over the steppe. A goods train came and went, and she overheard the soldier telling the story of her shame to the conductors, who roared with laughter. Their laughter was carried far out into the steppe, where the marmots were peeping softly.

"Lord have mercy," sighed the woman, pressing her body against the wall. But her sighs did not lighten the burden on her heart.

Towards morning she climbed up into the attic of the station and hanged herself with the clothes line.

The smell of the corpse led them to find Arina two days later. At first they were frightened; then they began to discuss who might be held guilty for what had happened. Nikolai Petrovich proved irrefutably that Gomozov was the guilty one. The stationmaster gave the switchman a blow on the jaw and warned him to keep his mouth shut.

Officials came and carried on an investigation. It was discovered that Arina had suffered from melancholia. Some railway workmen were ordered to take the body out into the steppe and bury it. This done, peace and order once more reigned at the station.

And once more its inhabitants went on living four minutes a day, pining away with loneliness and boredom, with heat and idleness, gazing enviously after the trains that rushed past leaving them behind.

. . . And in the winter, when blizzards came screaming and shrieking out of the steppe, pouring snow and fearsome sounds upon the little station, life there was lonelier than ever.

1897

SONG OF THE STORMY PETREL

O'ER THE SILVER plain of ocean winds are gathering the storm-clouds, and between the clouds and ocean proudly wheels the Stormy Petrel, like a streak of sable lightning.

Now his wing the wave caresses, now he rises like an arrow, cleaving clouds and crying fiercely, while the clouds detect a rapture in the bird's courageous crying.

In that crying sounds a craving for the tempest! Sounds the flaming of his passion, of his anger, of his confidence in triumph.

The gulls are moaning in their terror—moaning, darting o'er the waters, and would gladly hide their horror in the inky depths of ocean.

And the grebes are also moaning. Not for them the nameless rapture of the struggle. They are frightened by the crashing of the thunder.

And the foolish penguins cower in the crevices of rocks, while alone the Stormy Petrel proudly wheels above the ocean, o'er the silver-frothing waters!

Ever lower, ever blacker, sink the storm-clouds to the sea, and the singing waves are mounting in their yearning towards the thunder.

Strikes the thunder. Now the waters fiercely battle with the winds. And the winds in fury seize them in unbreakable embrace, hurling down the emerald masses to be shattered on the cliffs.

Like a streak of sable lightning wheels and cries the Stormy Petrel, piercing storm-clouds like an arrow, cutting swiftly through the waters.

He is coursing like a Demon, the black Demon of the tempest, ever laughing, ever sobbing—he is laughing at the storm-clouds, he is sobbing with his rapture.

In the crashing of the thunder the wise

Demon hears a murmur of exhaustion. He is certain that the clouds will not obliterate the sun: that the storm-clouds never, never, will obliterate the sun.

The waters roar. . . . The thunder crashes . . . .

Livid lightning flares in storm-clouds o'er the vast expanse of ocean, and the flaming darts are captured and extinguished by the waters, while the serpentine reflections writhe, expiring, in the deep.

The storm! The storm will soon be breaking!

Still the valiant Stormy Petrel proudly wheels among the lightning, o'er the roaring, raging ocean, and his cry resounds exultant, like a prophecy of triumph—

Let it break in all its fury!

1901